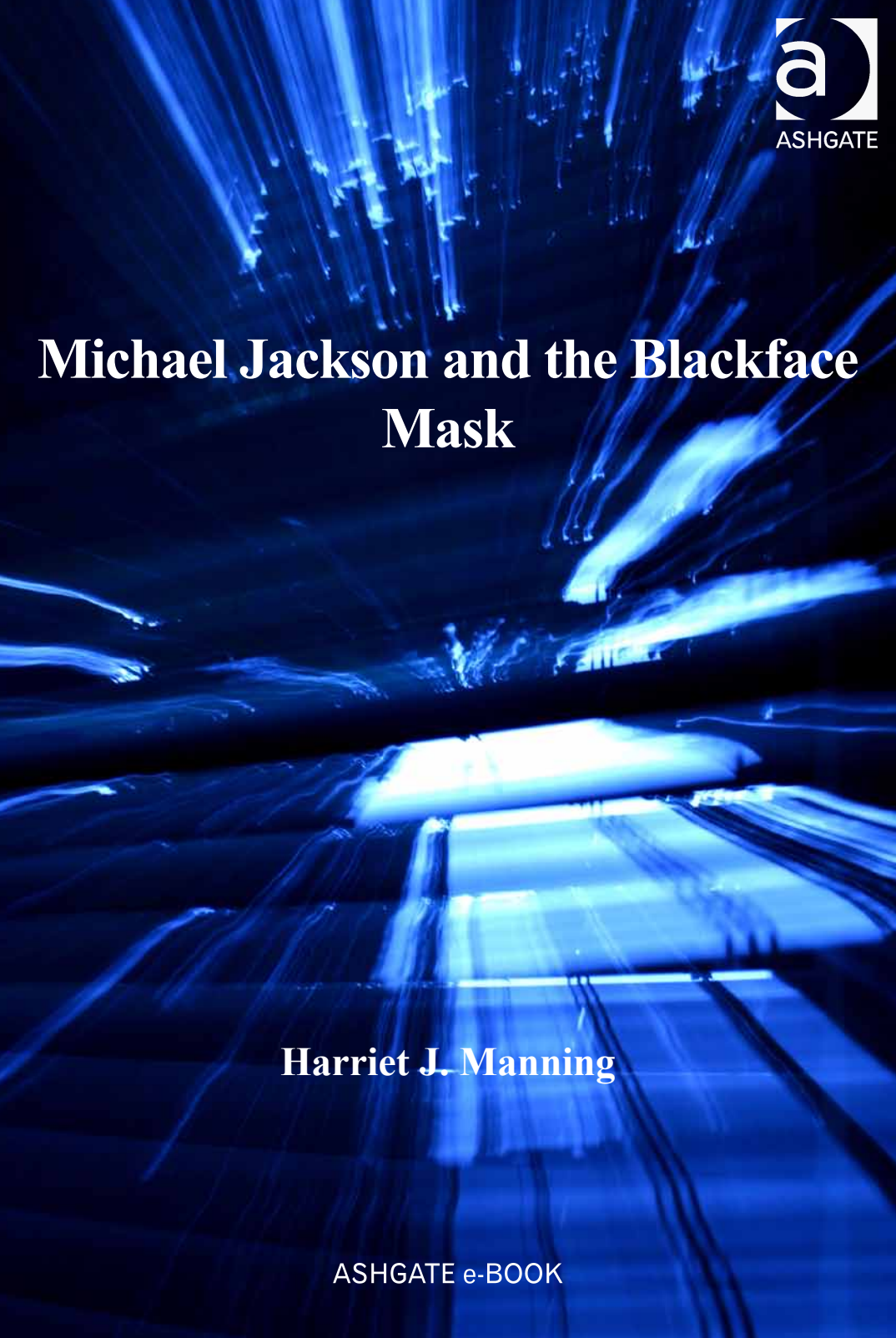
ASHGATE
Michael Jackson and the Blackface Mask
Harriet J. Manning
ASHGATE e-BOOK

MICHAEL JACKSON AND THE BLACKFACE MASK

In memory of Michael Jackson

Michael Jackson and the Blackface Mask

HARRIET J. MANNING
Newcastle University, UK

ASHGATE

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General Editor's Preface

The upheaval that occurred in musicology during the last two decades of the twentieth century has created a new urgency for the study of popular music alongside the development of new critical and theoretical models. A relativistic outlook has replaced the universal perspective of modernism (the international ambitions of the 12-note style); the grand narrative of the evolution and dissolution of tonality has been challenged, and emphasis has shifted to cultural context, reception and subject position. Together, these have conspired to eat away at the status of canonical composers and categories of high and low in music. A need has arisen, also, to recognize and address the emergence of crossovers, mixed and new genres, to engage in debates concerning the vexed problem of what constitutes authenticity in music and to offer a critique of musical practice as the product of free, individual expression.

Popular musicology is now a vital and exciting area of scholarship, and the *Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series* presents some of the best research in the field. Authors are concerned with locating musical practices, values and meanings in cultural context, and may draw upon methodologies and theories developed in cultural studies, semiotics, poststructuralism, psychology and sociology. The series focuses on popular musics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is designed to embrace the world's popular musics from Acid Jazz to Zydeco, whether high tech or low tech, commercial or non-commercial, contemporary or traditional.

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Introduction

Blackface minstrelsy – the white male mimicry of black song and dance – was the defining popular entertainment form of the nineteenth century in North America and Britain. The comic theatrical tradition was known for its vulgar mask, the white physiognomy having been blackened by boot polish, burnt cork or soot, and eyes and mouths painted with vermillion. Blackface minstrelsy was the tradition in which stereotypes of blackness, and black masculinity in particular, were harboured and perpetuated, acted out and consumed, yet for most of its popular reign black entertainers were denied involvement.

During the 1820s white entertainers such as T.D. Rice and George Washington Dixon began formally appropriating and theatricalizing black gestures through the construction of two main stage-types: the slave (most famously Jim Crow) and the black dandy. By the early 1840s minstrelsy had become formalized into the classic minstrel show and hundreds of touring troupes found success, among them the acclaimed Dan Emmett's Virginia Minstrels. It was not until much later, after the American Civil War, that black entertainers were permitted on the minstrel stage. Rather than being able to freely represent themselves, however, they remained limited by the tradition's white-created stereotypes, as well as by the literal mask. Over this time, minstrelsy was an entertainment form that was enjoyed up and down the social scale and in a wide variety of contexts and it sustained a whole host of meanings from racial difference and distaste to racial attraction and alliance.

Although blackface minstrelsy held centre stage in popular culture for the best part of an entire century – a period almost inconceivable today for the vogue of a popular form – it remains relatively ignored in many historical accounts of popular entertainment: 'quietly and conveniently forgotten', as Michael Pickering acknowledges in the British context.[1] In keeping with this elision, the legacy of the tradition in popular culture remains largely overlooked. Yet the continuum of blackface minstrelsy is everywhere to be found, from its imagery, stage gestures and dance to its numerous tropes and conventions. A recurring process of cultural exchange, the white appropriation of black cultural idioms is central to this continuum and is evident in artists as disparate as Eminem and Westlife, bringing with it a whole collection of baggage. Now transported into the twenty-first century, the gestures of minstrelsy live on in the performances of contemporary black artists: as W.T. Lhamon has detailed, the roots of much hip hop performance

[1] Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. xi.

gesture lie in minstrelsy and, as Richard Middleton has noted, rap's tropes of machismo, male narcissism and racially charged violence are indebted to the tradition's stereotypes of black masculinity.[2] Michael Jackson, perhaps *the* figure of crossover, whose early success led the way for the black artists who are now commonplace in mainstream pop culture, likewise embodied this historical lineage. So too does his audience in its reception of him.

When one observes Michael Jackson – his stage characterizations, his bows, spins and cocked knees and, of course, his own curious mask – with only limited knowledge of blackface minstrelsy one can see their relationship, clear as day. Yet no one has explored this at any length. That is the aim of this book: to examine the continuum of blackface minstrelsy embodied in Michael Jackson, both as performer and as controversial offstage figure. This offers a revisionist approach to Jackson, around whom fancy, myth and hyperbole (all mechanisms at the heart of blackface minstrelsy) have long circulated.

Before introducing the specifics of the classic blackface minstrelsy of the urban theatrical stage the book begins by acknowledging the dangers of looking at this formalization in isolation. In its longevity, nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy saw numerous manifestations among a variety of publics and its semantics were thus equally variable. Chapter 1 attends to this semantic complexity by summarizing minstrelsy's historiography, which has seen strong arguments not just for racism but also, and quite paradoxically, for cross-racial desire. This opening chapter closes with where the historiography of blackface minstrelsy is now in order to progress: the audience. This is where the book ultimately closes in the form of Michael Jackson's interpretative communities and their role in understanding the performance in question.

Now contextualized in the broader picture of the tradition, the classic guise of minstrelsy is detailed in Chapter 2 and in particular its stage characterizations of black masculinity and their meanings. This is followed by an introduction to how we might approach Michael Jackson's artistic legacy and the man himself in this contextual frame. While Chapter 2 explores the legacy of minstrelsy in contemporary black cultural expression, Chapter 3 contextualizes this by documenting the continuum of the tradition from its classic guise to the current day. Providing the key strand for this is the white appropriation of black cultural idioms and black marginalization in the same instance. Returning to Michael Jackson, Chapter 4 extends the exploration of minstrelsy in his work, which leads on to a discussion around its place in the formation of contemporary black male subjectivity. This is in the specific context of postbellum black minstrelsy (for which there is evidence, despite its collusion with minstrelsy's imagery, that it offered racial critique).

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[2] W.T. Lhamon Jr, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 218-26; Richard Middleton, *Voicing the Popular: On the Subjects of Popular Music* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 87-8.

Like the cultural vogue that became 'blacking up', Michael Jackson was a phenomenon and any comprehensive account of him must involve his 'audience' – its treatment, reactions and responses. For this reason Chapters 5 and 6 pay attention to others around Jackson and this is done through two white artists and their appropriations of his iconography and dance: the Irish boy band Westlife in Chapter 5 and the white American rap star Eminem in Chapter 6. Along the way, both chapters provide examples of contemporary forms of white blackface minstrelsy but, more crucially, suggest how others in relation to Jackson are equally imbued as he is in the legacy of the blackface mask. After discussion in Chapter 7 on the negotiations of gender and sexuality through transvestism in both minstrelsy and Jackson, Chapter 8 attends to the weeks that followed Jackson's death.

As dance and gesture are of particular importance in this account, the music video provides a central site for study. A number of filmic screengrabs therefore accompany the text for consideration alongside original minstrel illustrations. As the reception to and understandings of Jackson in the press and popular mind are as fundamental as Jackson himself in unravelling the legacy of minstrelsy he embodies, there has been extensive sourcing from the internet. This is detailed in its own listing set apart within the main bibliography.

All but two chapters of the first version of this book had been written when, amid preparations for staging his comeback *This Is It*, the news broke that Michael Jackson was dead. Originally, on completion of the work, all tenses were retained as present as intended. But as a few years have now passed since Jackson's death all references made to the singer have been updated to the past. This is without forgetting however that the mass of music, film and imagery that Jackson left behind remains as alive and in vogue as ever (as I write Pepsi are launching a massive advertising campaign in conjunction with the Jackson Estate). But more fundamentally, the social and racial contexts – which combined translate into the stuff of blackface minstrelsy – that gave birth to that work and the man himself, are those we continue to occupy: 'Dancers come and go in the twinkling of an eye', Jackson himself once wrote, 'but the dance lives on'.[3]

[3] Michael Jackson, quoted in inlay to Michael Jackson, *Dangerous* (Epic, 504424 2, 1991).

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Chapter 1
Conflict and Contradiction: Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy

Nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy – the white parody of black song and dance – was a complex world; its meanings were multivalent, ambiguous and contradictory, both over time and at once among its spectators. Not only did minstrelsy exist over a prolonged historical sweep, in a wide variety of contexts and publics (who moulded it to the shapes of their desires), but it was also built on parody – always unstable and double-edged in its meaning. As Dale Cockrell asks: 'What exactly are intentions, facts, fallacies, in this kind of world, where burlesque is everything?'[1] With the mask a central convention, minstrelsy was inevitably about twoness – most obviously black and white – about being other than who one was or seemed to be, and this 'two-facedness' allowed it to symbolize all sorts. As David Roediger writes: 'Blackface could be everything – rowdy, rebellious and respectable – because it could be denied that it was anything.'[2] This chapter introduces these complexities, a discussion structured round the tradition's historiography, itself reflective of its subject's ambiguous nature. Indeed, the historiography of blackface minstrelsy has witnessed not just diversity but an array of contradictions brought together only by their circulation around one fundamental: blackface minstrelsy's role in meeting the needs of whites.

While relatively early documentations of minstrelsy exist (such as Edward LeRoy Rice's *Monarchs of Minstrelsy, from 'Daddy' Rice to Date*, 1911), the first scholarly accounts of the tradition largely emerged in the early 1960s. These were led by Hans Nathan with *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (1962) and other similar accounts, including that by Robert C. Toll – *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (1974) and Alexander Saxton – 'Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology' (1975). A 'second generation' of approaches, which represents a clear departure from these early accounts, emerged in the 1990s, marked by Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993). This new approach was later consolidated by, among others, Dale Cockrell in *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and their World* (1997), W.T. Lhamon Jr in *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance*

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[1] Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and their World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 137.

[2] David Roediger, 'White Skins, Black Masks: Minstrelsy and White Working Class Formation before the Civil War', in David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 116.

from Jim Crow to Hip Hop (1998) and William J. Mahar in *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (1999). However, this revisionist historiography is not without its critics, David Roediger (*Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, 1991) and Michael Rogin (*Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*, 1996) among them.

As well as its subject's ambiguous nature, a key reason for this turnabout in blackface historiography, from first to second generation, is the differences in historical location of its subject matter: the first generation focuses on the classic minstrel show, the second on minstrelsy's existence prior to this formalization. Of further note, the varying approaches to minstrelsy, however, are also the consequence of the differing historical locations of their writers. The first wave of scholars broadly represents traditional empirically-based historiography, functionalists who work from a presentist view and base their understandings on binary social structures and meta-narratives. This scholarly interest rose out of the same moment of the Civil Rights movement and Black Power and of the breakthrough of black American pop, including Motown, into the white mainstream. The second wave of accounts, meanwhile, illustrates the impact of cultural studies, post-structuralism and anti-foundationalist discourse and post-colonial theory. These approaches display the postmodernist favouring among cultural critics of the particular over the general and the subsequent interest in, and celebration of, multiply determinable, positioned subjects.

Early historiography: the minstrel show, racism and social division

As typical approaches of their generation, those of Nathan, Toll and Saxton focus on blackface minstrelsy in its commercial form, as it existed on the northern theatrical stage during the antebellum years. Toll does this by documenting the evolution of the institutional minstrel show of the 1840s while Nathan follows the career of Dan Emmett – the founder and leader of the Virginia Minstrels, the most successful group working in minstrelsy during its classic years. Saxton discusses what he introduces as 'the first three decades of minstrelsy', which he describes as being those from 'roughly 1845 to 1875'.[3] With this typical focus on the classic minstrel show, however, Nathan, Toll and Saxton all generally ignore the fact that minstrel entertainment had been in existence well before then, for at least twenty years in fact.

These texts present minstrelsy at face value, understanding its image – the grotesque blackface mask – to be its unproblematic referent. Indeed, the product of its time, minstrelsy in this context played out in popular culture the white racism of the 'real world' and, for Saxton specifically, the worst aspects of Jacksonian

[3] Alexander Saxton, 'Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology', *American Quarterly*, 27/1 (1975): 3-28, at p. 5.

Democracy. This was the political philosophy of Andrew Jackson, President of America from 1828 to 1837. Andrew Jackson was a propagandist of popular democracy and individual liberty for white men, and strongly supported slavery. In these early accounts, minstrelsy's politics are clear: 'From the outset, minstrelsy unequivocally branded Negroes as inferiors.'[4]

In these texts the narrative paradigm of minstrelsy's origins is one of cultural expropriation and exploitation; white entertainers consciously seeking out and learning to copy, and lampoon, black cultural material to create what became antebellum America's defining popular form. Toll, for example, names Englishman Charles Matthews somewhat exclusively as 'the first' to adopt plantation gestures to create specific stage characterizations through the close observation of slaves. 'While visiting America in 1822', Toll explains, '[Matthews] studied Negro dialect, transcribed songs, lore, speeches, and sermons, and eagerly collected "scraps and malaprops".'[5] Similarly, for both Toll and Nathan, Jim Crow – the most popular minstrel stage-type – was born out of individual pilferage from black culture by New York-born Thomas Dartmouth Rice, known as 'T.D. Rice', a woodworker apprentice from New York's Seventh Ward. Keen to forge a career in theatre, Rice, while touring the South in 1828, secretly observed a crippled black stable hand perform an 'odd, disjointed dance'. Rice appropriated this style and, after he had perfected it by making some 'refinements', took it to the theatrical stages of New York and London where it was received as triumphant.[6] For Saxton, blackface minstrelsy was shaped by Rice but also by Dan Emmett and his Virginia Minstrels, E.P. Christy (another white entrepreneur and owner and operator of the renowned Christy's Minstrels) and Stephen Foster – 'the major white innovator of minstrel music' (though Foster did not emerge until towards the end of the 1840s, which was relatively late in the era of the classic minstrel show).[7] It is these men who Saxton refers to as the 'founders and purveyors' of the form.[8]

Running as a theoretical thread, particularly through Toll's documentation of the gestures and politics of minstrelsy, is the notion of containment through racial differencing and distancing. Toll typically paints a social picture of nineteenth-century northern America within which races failed to mingle (ignoring the South where they more freely did). Consequently, Toll suggests most free American whites 'did not know what slaves were like, [but] believed or wanted to believe that black slaves differed greatly from [themselves]'.[9] For this reason fugitive slaves posed the biggest threat, running to the North where whites wanted no part of them, in the hope for social betterment. As Toll details, the heavily stereotyped

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4 Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 67.

5 Ibid., p. 26.

6 Ibid., p. 28.

7 Saxton, 'Jacksonian Ideology', p. 5.

8 Ibid.

9 Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 34.

images of blackness, which came to define minstrelsy, satisfied this white fantasy of racial difference. By mapping over-determined, derisive images – fixed attributes and physical characteristics and gestures – onto blacks from the white 'outside', minstrelsy worked, as Toll explains, to keep blacks under tight control. Minstrelsy's characterizations showed blacks worthy of and fit only for plantation life, wholly incapable of self-possession, as the helpless, hapless northern black dandy (the stage-type counterpart to Jim Crow the slave) proved. This disguise of racial containment, as a gift to the 'Negro', assuaged white discomfort over the morality of slavery as well as the threat and dread of living with difference. Serving white superiority and white self-aggrandizement, the minstrel show successfully confirmed and sustained the unequal distribution of power between races.

The notion of racial containment persists in Toll's recognition of how some song texts referenced, even quietly celebrated, slave retaliation while the harsh reality of white power was sometimes apparently questioned. But although, at such moments, an anti-slavery stance through sympathy with oppressed slaves was being voiced, for Toll this was always within the safe confines of the plantation: sympathy could be expressed, but not so as to pose any *real* threat of change. At other times, these were moments when minstrelsy could acknowledge or portray slave discontent, stupidity and mischievousness and in the process was a mode by which to merely get a laugh rather than represent any real racial critique.[10] For Saxton, minstrelsy presented an almost entirely monolithic attitude to slavery, particularly through the 1850s and the war years during which it 'faithfully reproduced the white slaveowners' viewpoint'.[11]

Largely due to the focus on the minstrel show as it existed during the antebellum years, Hans Nathan in his study of classic minstrelsy (*Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*) fails entirely to acknowledge black performers (who, denied access onto the minstrel stage during its heyday, emerged latterly after the Civil War). The only exception to this in Nathan's account is William Henry Lane, better known as 'Juba' – the only black performer who found professional success during the antebellum years. Saxton, likewise, despite his account extending through postbellum minstrelsy, does not mention the involvement of black performers at all but remains focused instead on its white versions and the white-led ridicule of blacks. Toll, however, devotes some time to black minstrels.

Far from providing a corrective to minstrel stereotypes, black entertainers had no choice but to reinforce them even as white actors moved away from such images. Toll uses a mid-century advertisement promoting minstrel character wind-up toys to visualize the way black performers were constructed and 'controlled and manipulated by and for whites' in the realm of minstrelsy.[12] Toll draws on the highest paid postbellum black minstrel Billy Kersands as an example of this. Perpetuating the image of the wide-mouthed slave, Kersands made his large mouth

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10 Ibid., p. 74.

11 Saxton, 'Jacksonian Ideology', p. 18.

12 Toll, *Blacking Up*, pp. 224-5.

the central feature of his acts while he played to the traditional roles of ignorance and slow-wit. Acceding to the stereotypes of their race, black actors had to pay a great price for entering white show business (although it is probable that to some degree the pervading racial ideology these images symbolized had also become internalized on the black psyche; a process Eric Lott, among others, argues for later). Despite Toll's persistent assertions that black minstrels were in numerous ways controlled by whites, he does look to suggest there was also an undercurrent of protest among them and their audience: 'Since such indirect and covert jibes were common in black folk culture but not in white', Toll notes, 'many blacks in the audience would have been sensitized to hear and enjoy even such surreptitious barbs, while most whites might not even have noticed them.'[13] While white racial fantasies were being confirmed and indulged by black minstrels, a covert arena for black rebellion was also being created, but despite Toll's acknowledgement of this his concept of confinement is never far away: '[The] black [minstrel] tradition characteristically utilized symbolic indirection and contained "victories" for black characters, even if nothing more than momentary psychological reversals.'[14]

Nathan, Toll and Saxton unite in their conclusions that the racist ridicule of blacks was the minstrel show's ultimate force. Nathan and Saxton, particularly, allow no room for variegated subject positions among audiences, an elision heavily challenged in later documentations. Saxton makes very clear what he understands was the consistent nature of minstrelsy's politics, both among audiences and through the decades in which it reigned. Saxton writes: 'Blackface minstrelsy's dominance of popular entertainment amounted to half a century of inurement to the uses of white supremacy.'[15] The three scholars differ in their methodology in reaching this conclusion however: Toll understands minstrelsy as symptomatic of its cultural and social contexts; Saxton locates it in the frame of working-class consciousness through the politics of Jacksonian and neo-Jacksonian Democracy; and Nathan sees it as born from the imagination of Dan Emmett, minstrelsy's central creative force.

Revisionist historiography: the underclass, cross-racial desire and alliance

Though fundamental in the understanding of minstrelsy, especially in the specifics of its performance practices, such early race-based accounts, however, now appear over-simplistic. From the early 1990s, the problems with these univocal interpretations began to formally come to light, including their failure to deal with not just anomalies but more broadly, and linked to this, the subversive power being increasingly recognized to be characteristic of popular culture. Lott makes this observation in the introduction to *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the*

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13 Ibid., p. 246.

14 Ibid., p. 260.

15 Saxton, 'Jacksonian Ideology', p. 27.

American Working Class, a study that he explains was motivated by a dissatisfaction with former modes of racial critique. Cockrell raises a similar concern in *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and their World* when he describes the received understandings of minstrelsy as having 'polluted our understanding of the early period'.[16] With regard to attitudes and meanings of race Cockrell cites Toll's interpretation as being particularly problematic, the meanings of minstrelsy not only univocalized but treated as static across quite a historical sweep.

While the racism of the professional stage, among the upper classes in particular, as well as in the 'respectable' press, is not denied, the second generation of blackface scholars presents a much more complicated interpretation of minstrelsy. In particular Lott and W.T. Lhamon Jr, as well as Cockrell, do this by attending less to minstrelsy's commercial form than to its 'early period' – its various manifestations prior to its crystallization, such as its existence on the streets among the underclasses, including blacks themselves. These scholars argue that blackface minstrelsy actually worked to *disrupt* the dominant racist ideology earlier accounts insist it sustained and this is based around two key and intertwined theories: first, that minstrelsy, especially in its early form, had the ability to *resist* white racism; and second, that this relatively early form was used effectively as a class tactic. Lhamon typically insists that minstrelsy was 'trans-"race", significantly cross-class, and … certainly turbulent'.[17]

Providing foundation to these accounts are their authors' narrative paradigms of minstrelsy's origins, which mark clear departures from those rather more mythic ones of their scholarly predecessors. Painting a cross-racial picture among antebellum America's metropolitan poor – the context in which Rice grew up – Lhamon argues that races mingled and minstrel gestures were less products of cultural thievery than tokens of wilful transfer. Lott describes how, as minstrelsy evolved into an institution, it drew on not so much an exclusive black culture as that of a mottled underclass. William J. Mahar, in *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Minstrelsy and Antebellum Popular Culture*, and Cockrell also present the development of the minstrel phenomenon in a more variegated way: Cockrell argues that it was fed not only by black cultural material but also by a variety of Western folk rituals; while Mahar brings out and explores the numerous European musical, dramatic and literary sources he argues were drawn upon in minstrelsy's formative years.

The idea that early blackface minstrelsy countered racism (as much as it enforced it in later years) binds the studies of Lott, Cockrell, Lhamon and Mahar. Lott and Lhamon in particular pursue vigorously the argument that minstrelsy represented racial desire as much as it did dread and that it was this that initially fuelled it. Even amid the form's harshest moments of racist ridicule, minstrelsy was, undeniably, a very bold acknowledgement of and indulgence in black culture (continuing later, as Lhamon argues, into the white enthusiasm for rock 'n' roll

[16] Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, p. xi.

[17] Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 72.

and hip hop). Similarly, for Lott, minstrelsy offered a licensed arena within which the indulgence of sexual or otherwise prohibited material, feelings and fantasies could be enjoyed, which, in the process, formed moments of black power. Lott draws on Roland Barthes's theory of pleasure and what he calls the 'formidable underside' of cultural products: the idea that culturally-produced forms contain within them, despite their apparent endorsement of dominant ideology, a frequently underestimated ability to lead their consumers 'in wayward political directions'.[18]

Far from projecting essentialist attitudes to and acts towards race, blackface minstrelsy for these later scholars was more about constructionism: questioning white subjects not only eager to build their own identities through engagement with blackness but keen also, perhaps, to make attempts to correct their Other's social plight, with whom and to which they could identify. It emerges in these later accounts how early blackface minstrelsy signalled not so much racial disconnection as alliance in which Rice – its biggest name – was 'an imp of crossing, not separating'.[19] Minstrelsy was about not just the permeability of the colour line – etched so crudely by Nathan, Toll and Saxton – but its actual negation; an act of Self–Other incorporation. As a way of realizing this, Lhamon draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, employing the doodle of the duck-rabbit conundrum. Depicting at once the outlined figures of a duck and a rabbit in the same image, Wittgenstein's doodle for Lhamon visualizes minstrelsy's ability to ensure the overlapping of two identities held together as one in a sort of 'third'. 'Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit is like a white performer in blackface', Lhamon explains. 'Is he white, is he black? Is he yaller [mulatto]? Is it a duck, is it a rabbit? Is it a duckrab? Something is queer about this duck-rabbit, depend upon it.'[20]

Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit works more broadly to illustrate for Lhamon blackface minstrelsy's semantic oscillations between racial desire and racial disdain, one being the duck, the other the rabbit, that one can variably see either together or separately, or even one but not the other. Cockrell and Lott do this also by establishing two conflicting minstrel 'worlds' as a tool by which to understand how a single phenomenon may be at once so multi-dimensional and oppositional in its meaning. But Lhamon also presents minstrel gestures in the wider context of what he terms the 'lore cycle' to capture how their meanings are variable, both at once and over time. Lhamon's lore cycle allows for anomalies and multiplicity: in every group members can query their lore or hover undecidedly at its margins, maybe even next to another lore. Moreover, the members of a lore may not even reveal to one another the politics of their acts, especially when subversion is involved. Lhamon details how lore can also be deviant across historical periods: 'Patterns of lore rise and fall. They sustain complex meanings over time, but they

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[18] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 141.

[19] Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 204.

[20] Ibid., p. 137.

do not enforce the past exactly. Rather the turns of a lore cycle convert the dead hands of the past into living presences that deviate from what went before.'[21]

In sum, among predominantly lower-class whites and disdained blacks, it has been argued in recent accounts that blackface minstrelsy in fact critiqued dominant racist ideology, most marked in its early years. Linked to this subversive quality, with striking commonality, minstrelsy's second generation of historiographers also claim, and pursue with vigour, that the form was used as a class tactic, race remaining in the frame but taking on a mediatory role of other social registrations. While this social aspect of minstrelsy is recognized by Saxton and Toll (who both note that the black dandy stage-type could ridicule upper-class pretensions as well as the aspirations of free northern blacks) later scholars, however, firmly situate minstrelsy in the context of an intense awareness of and competition for social position. Through relatively early minstrelsy, blacks and lower-class whites united to stage social protest. Through images of blackness, this new cross-racial alliance attacked majority values and critiqued society's quickly rigidifying class structure. Mahar, for example, claims minstrelsy's burlesque opera (to which he gives much attention) stood for the coded criticism of an art form that was helping to consolidate an elitist high culture. In this context, blackface minstrelsy questioned how capitalism allowed self-improvement and social elevation to be increasingly determined by wealth and political power. It also critiqued superficial behaviours, appearance and other such outward signs of wealth that were beginning to mirror European society. Through the close analysis of song texts and skits, Mahar highlights the various rhetorical techniques, including role reversal and status inversion, that were used to level distinctions of class as well as race so that the powerless blackface character could outsmart or command the powerful. With the firm belief that social betterment should be based on the quality and ability of an individual rather than on race, power and wealth, this early minstrelsy called for an egalitarian social order. Through images of blackness, minstrelsy saw biting commentary on whites and white culture.

If blackface minstrelsy in this context was about the critique and reconfiguration of white American social and political philosophies, one might wonder why the black physiognomy – the literal blackface mask – was still employed. For Mahar the answer to this lies in the fact that the blackface mask was effectively used as a 'protective' shield, not least to mask the exploration of deviant social and political philosophies (underway through the ridicule of the upper classes and surreptitious formation of a cross-racial underclass alliance). But the mask also worked to shield minstrels from any personal identification with the material they performed as well as to protect white egos from disparaging jokes about themselves. For, indeed, to those better sorts the mask was read literally as the ridicule of the black fraternity and their culture. As Cockrell writes: 'They looked at the blackface of common people and saw only black.'[22]

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21 Ibid., p. 71.

22 Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, p. 168.

Providing flesh to this theory of masked rebellion, Cockrell draws on the low newspaper editor and early blackface minstrel and contemporary of Rice, George Washington Dixon. Through the examination and comparison of minstrel song texts performed by Dixon and newspaper articles written by him, Cockrell illustrates how Dixon confronted social issues and attacked society's powerful both on and off stage. But while this proved successful under the mask, for what Dixon brought unmasked to the popular press he was condemned and later exiled. As well as displaying, here, the protection the minstrel mask offered, Cockrell also reveals how different publics gained knowledge through it: either treating its grotesqueries as the meaning, that is racism, where the mask was the signifier or treating it as a sign for concealment, the mask a secondary signifier to subvert knowledge gained through image.[23] In this sense blackness was a vehicle employed to represent among some and hide among others socially prohibited ideas in a multi-layered satire. While Cockrell tends to see this as the clear exploitation of blacks, Mahar, by placing burlesque at minstrelsy's heart, argues that the mask as the mimicry of blacks, among the powerless, was a known charade. Forced to adhere to it, many black entertainers after the Civil War approached the mask in this way.

What becomes apparent is blackface minstrelsy's very instability: depending on rank and race, as well as cultural and historical moment, the mask served a variety of purposes and needs on social, political and racial levels. Scholars of the later wave in minstrelsy's historiography employ various theories in an effort to try to capture this complexity, not least Lott, with his theoretical paradigm of dialectics: love and theft. For Lott, beneath its racism, minstrelsy was about the continual conflict of oppositional social forces: while minstrelsy signalled cultural pilferage and exploitation it also represented social osmosis and the celebration of blackness; while through it racial demarcation was being drawn, the blurring of Self and Other was underway; while a culture was being contained, a culture was being contaminated; and while the fear for and disdain of blackness fuelled the tradition, fascination, envy, miscegenation and homoeroticism were also rife. Lhamon employs Cain, from the biblical parable of brothers Cain and Abel, as a figurehead for this duality. When, on making offerings to God, Abel's meat was preferred over Cain's grain, Cain 'rose up against Abel his brother and slew him'; as punishment God marked Cain and sent him roaming, assigning him a fugitive and vagabond (Genesis 4). While Cain symbolizes fraternal strife and its consequences, Lhamon argues that in attacking Abel, Cain also attacked preferential differentiation to become an emblem of semantic contradiction: 'He wanders forever betokening doubleness … the brother-killer who evokes brotherhood … a divided self whose experience broadcasts the need for brotherly love.'[24]

To capture how minstrelsy was neither one thing nor another but betwixt and between, Cockrell, meanwhile, presents the tradition as liminal. While biologists have the concept known as the 'edge effect' to reference how life tends towards

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23 Ibid., p. 141.

24 Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 125.

the interstices of major ecosystems, Cockrell explores how Mikhail Bakhtin, in cultural theory, makes a similar theorization when he writes that 'the most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries'.[25] As it is clearly a threshold phenomenon bonding oppositional complements and used to sort problems of race, politics and class, this can certainly be said of minstrelsy.

Excesses and overflows in the historiography of blackface minstrelsy

What binds all these later accounts of minstrelsy is the deeper interrogation of the racism that earlier documentations foreground: with their post-structuralist explorations into the politically subversive and destructive nature of popular culture, in these more recent accounts racism was only half minstrelsy's motivation. However, perhaps given the ambiguous nature of minstrelsy it is of no surprise that its numerous scholarly studies do not all neatly fall into these two generations of historiographers or that neither might constitute the end of the story.

In *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (1996), Michael Rogin critiques the approach of the likes of Lott and Lhamon as typical postmodern revisionists of blackface minstrel theory. Taking issue with their preoccupation with the 'permeability of the colour line' (as Lott puts it), Rogin argues that they subsequently marginalize the real, material politics of the tradition's black expropriation. Rogin explains: 'So anxious are they to find points of identification across racial lines that, protests notwithstanding, they dwell insufficiently both on the exclusion of actual African Americans from their own representations and on the grotesque, demeaning, animalistic blackface mask.'[26] Rogin does not deny the interracial variability of minstrelsy, which Lott and Lhamon typically celebrate, but insists that in this respect it was also nonetheless flawed, 'for the color line was permeable in only one direction'.[27] Indeed, as Toll, in particular, highlights in a way later critics tend not to, while minstrelsy allowed whites to play with blackness (and their own whiteness in the process), it failed to permit blacks the same luxury. In discussion of Bert Williams, one of the greatest postbellum black entertainers, Rogin makes the point of black limitation: 'Certainly they [blacks acting to black audiences] pushed the form as far in the direction of Afro-American self-expression as it could go, though the spread of burnt cork to cover those it supposedly represented is hardly evidence of progress toward racial equality.'[28]

This disparity in the racial understanding of minstrelsy may, again, be due in part to differences in historical location of subject matter (Rogin attends to

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[25] Mikhail Bakhtin, quoted in Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, p. 160.

[26] Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 37.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid., p. 44.

later minstrelsy). But this cannot be the only reason, for Rogin does not ignore the earlier, predominantly offstage versions of the form that Lott and Lhamon focus on in their argument for racial attraction. In particular, Rogin documents blackface riots during the 1820s in which white, working-class men 'blacked up' and attacked black neighbourhoods. Rogin argues that these were the same men who made up the audiences of the theatrical minstrelsy that emerged shortly after, on which Lott focuses. Rogin insists that minstrelsy did not represent univocal racism, as its early accounts would suggest, but at the same time nor did it create a single, interracial political working-class alliance.[29] Rogin highlights how many working-class white men appropriated black cultural gestures as rebellion to form their own identities, including confirming their whiteness and superiority. This is an argument that Roediger in *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991) also pursues.

Roediger, too, broadly critiques the notion that early blackface minstrelsy represented desire and alliance among the working classes. To do this he draws on the carnivalesque Negro Election Day festivals of the early 1800s: black public events that white working-class men, hostile towards a collective black presence on the streets, turned against. These hostile white men were those who first 'blacked up' to take part in the riots against blacks that Rogin details and who, only a little later, enjoyed the blackface minstrelsy Lott and others argue was about cross-racial desire. For Roediger, as for Rogin, the argument just does not stack up, rather from its earliest days blackface minstrelsy was about black marginalization: minstrelsy stepped in as genuine black cultural forms (of which the Negro Election Day was one) were driven out. As Rogin notes, it was the minstrel song, not the Negro spiritual, which ultimately served America as its national popular form. In both Rogin and Roediger there are echoes of Nathan Huggins's much earlier argument in *Harlem Renaissance* (1971): that minstrelsy, whatever it may have embodied, nevertheless resulted in the restriction of black cultural development. This is evident from the postbellum black actors (who could only *try* to negotiate ingrained theatrical characterizations through layered satire) to the black comic reviews of the Harlem Renaissance (which, rather than work to define a new one, 'continued to exploit a corrupt tradition', Huggins insists).[30]

While the postmodern revisionist accounts of minstrelsy – which see the phenomenon as oppositional to the contemporaneous racial status quo – have for Roediger been worthwhile they ultimately fail. For Roediger, such accounts underplay its racism; which, he argues, was only ever mildly mitigated on stage and never beyond it.[31] To back up his claim, Roediger draws on William F. Stowe and David Grimsted's 'White-Black Humour' which, he states, constitutes the foundation to the subversive theories of Lott and Lhamon. Roediger highlights the

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[29] Ibid., p. 38.

[30] Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 291.

[31] Roediger, 'White Skins, Black Masks', pp. 123-4.

assumption on the part of Stowe and Grimsted that minstrelsy's racist and social content could be separated. By this, Stowe and Grimsted effectively reduce the fact that the mask was very real to its spectators and so much so that it 'subverted the social criticism being expressed'.[32] For Roediger and Rogin the mask spoke loudest and Roediger draws directly on Saxton to prove it: 'The ideological impact of minstrelsy was programmed by its conventional blackface form.'[33] Here, we see a return to older understandings of blackface minstrelsy. For Saxton the medium was the message and as Roediger concludes: 'To ask whether it might have been different is surely to run the risk of being branded a utopian.'[34]

Where now? The place of minstrel historiography today

Reflective of minstrelsy's own ambiguities – its inherent 'two-facedness' – its historiography has become equally complex and contradictory: while Rogin and Roediger argue that blackface minstrelsy cannot be worked out solely on the basis of a class-based mode of interpretation, Lott, Lhamon, Cockrell and Mahar reveal a race-based method is equally inadequate. But one must ask why, beyond its own complexities, minstrelsy's historiography has followed this narrative. In discussion of the nature of cultural lore, Lhamon insists it moves in a cycle, not a circle: it moves and returns.[35] Perhaps this could be said of its historiography, for while the meanings of minstrelsy have slipped and shifted over time, so have its documentations – like its subject, connected to the cultural moments from which they have arisen. We ought to question what is at stake in such accounts and indeed any in which the aim is to analyse musical and visual representations of social categories. Consequently, it ought to be questioned whether such nineteenth-century moments should be completely open to fluid, postmodern contestation (undeniably, on one level, the way we understand political, social and cultural economies to intersect is what the debate is about).

So where does this, and its inherent ambiguity, leave the historiography of blackface minstrelsy today? Despite the multiple theorizations witnessed, Mahar acknowledges that it still remains unclear what audiences of minstrelsy really saw in the mask, what they believed it to represent. Consequently, Mahar suggests that the focus on the audience is where minstrelsy's study has logically come to rest.[36] But this presents a difficult task: there are no films that document audience reactions and behaviours; few accounts exist of the performances themselves

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[32] Ibid., p. 124.

[33] Saxton, quoted in Roediger, 'White Skins, Black Masks', p. 125.

[34] Roediger, 'White Skins, Black Masks', p. 127.

[35] Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 71.

[36] William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), pp. 192 and 347.

AMERICAN THEATRE BOWERY NEW YORK
View of the Stage on the fifty seventh night of Mr. T. D. RICE of Kentucky in his original and celebrated extravaganza of
JIM CROW on which occasion every department of the house was thronged to an excess unprecedented in the records of
theatrical attraction — New York 25th November 1833

Figure 1.1 T.D. Rice as Jim Crow at the Bowery Theatre, 1833. Negative number 43478, Collection of The New-York Historical Society

(and those that do tend to vary); scripts and sheet music do not account for the ad-libbing that was standard practice (as performers varied their shows and attitudes depending on their audience); and different parts of theatrical shows (from the slave Jim Crow to Zip Coon the dandy to the cross-dressed 'wench' figure and to all these when black actors finally played them) not only drew varied reactions from different racial and social groups but also *among* them. In recognition of this last difficulty, Lott writes:

> The racial predispositions loosely attached to those moments, I would suggest, were disavowal or ridicule of the Other and interracial identification with it, though belief in the authenticity of blackface called forth ridicule easily enough; indeed, the valuations and subject positions tend to multiply when one attempts to sketch them out.[37]

For Lott, this is encapsulated by an 1833 engraving of Rice 'jumping Jim Crow' (as the slave's signature song and dance went) at the New York's Bowery Theatre (see Figure 1.1). The audience, running amok, throngs to the foot of the stage and overflows onto it so that its members fight over and around Rice, beautifully indicating, for Lott, 'the complex, interrelated interests called forth by such performances'.[38] Lott goes on: 'Indeed, to call it a drawing of Rice already understates the case.'[39]

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37 Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 124.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

Chapter 2
‘Black or White’: From Jim Crow to Michael Jackson

While acknowledging that blackface minstrelsy took on a variety of guises across a broad historical sweep, as well as being a tradition notoriously ambiguous among its consumers, this chapter focuses on one particular manifestation and its semantics: the classic minstrel show. This was minstrelsy’s formalization into a highly profitable commercial form for whites and it reigned supreme on the northern American theatrical stage during the antebellum years. The classic minstrel show provides an effective starting point by which to explore (in relation to its legacy) the meanings of the grotesque blackface mask, which, in this realm, were literal: the classic mask confirmed dominant racist ideology that allowed for the fulfilment of white needs. Of note, for all the various approaches to minstrelsy (as laid out in the preceding chapter), the racism of its form on the professional stage has never been denied.

The classic minstrel show works here also as a mode by which to introduce the specifics of blackface minstrelsy’s performance practices, including its black characterizations, stage gestures, dance steps and tropes. This provides the first link to the book’s main subject – Michael Jackson – when, in the second part of this chapter, it is detailed how this gestural vocabulary and racial representation re-emerges in Jackson’s iconic imagery, as well as its assumptions in the popular mind. The chapter closes with an introductory discussion on Jackson’s self-change – his own mask – to illustrate how Jackson, and the matters of race he courted, can also be understood and explored in the context of blackface minstrelsy.

Part I: The classic minstrel show

As slave ships sailed from the West Indies and Africa to the New World, white Americans found themselves among black people for the first time and this new proximity filled many with dread. What developed into the classic minstrel show – the white theatrical parody of blacks – dealt with this dread, reducing black people to stage-types and objects of ridicule. Beneath black masks or with faces smeared with burnt cork, white male actors parodied the music and dance that slaves had brought to the New World to form the basis of minstrelsy’s comic skits, sketches and songs. From the late 1820s through to the 1840s, this practice developed into an increasingly professionalized theatrical tradition both in antebellum America and Victorian Britain to literally become the pop music and dance of its day. The

minstrel show spread like wildfire around the world to countries as far apart as Australia and South Africa.

During the 1820s in New York the first large and rising population of professional blackface minstrels emerged, among them Thomas Dartmouth Rice, better known as 'T.D. Rice'. Rice was central in establishing what would become the minstrel show's most prevalent character: Jim Crow, a southern slave-type who became the staple figure of minstrelsy. Rice premiered Jim Crow at the Bowery Theatre, New York in 1823 after which he became a superstar among audiences, who held him in high esteem particularly for the close attention he paid to the visual aspects of his character. The 'birth' of the minstrel show proper came two decades later when Dan Emmett's Virginia Minstrels performed a seminal show, also at the Bowery Theatre, on 6 February 1843. This saw the consolidation of blackface minstrelsy into a heavily commercialized, highly profitable theatrical form comprising not just Jim Crow but a whole host of 'blacked up' caricatures. Hundreds of successful touring troupes emerged quickly thereafter and found huge success: among them the Alabama Minstrels, the Christy Minstrels and Edward Pell's Ethiopian Serenaders.

As the genre spread across America and around the world white entertainers found wealth and fame: the minstrel show was a terrain in which whites excelled. But while white men defined, performed and profited from their portrayals of blackness black performers were denied involvement. The only real exception to this was the New York-born William Henry Lane – better known as 'Juba' – notably the only black performer to find success in minstrelsy through the antebellum years, the height of the genre's popularity. Nonetheless, in his self-representation, Juba had no choice but to wear the mask and play the derisive stage-types that were synonymous with minstrelsy.

Black caricature: the southern slave and the northern dandy

The slave of the southern plantation such as Jim Crow was the most common caricature of the minstrel show. The minstrel slave typically wore ragged clothes, wrinkled socks, odd shoes and a broad-brimmed hat on a 'woolly' wig. He had wide moon-like eyes and a big grin, often with lolling tongue, to portray stupidity, greed and content; for despite his arduous life the slave was always happy (see Figure 2.1). Indeed, the slave was assigned a set of fixed attributes of which contentment, stupidity and greed were just some. Not only ugly and dishevelled, the slave such as Jim Crow, Old Dan Tucker and Gumbo Chaff was also primitive and uninhibited by social and artistic conventions: he had no social graces and his art was simple and spontaneous. The Virginia Minstrels sat in a rough and ready stage formation for their musical numbers, which typically featured wild fiddle, jaw bone and banjo solos and were repetitive and unpolished to parody 'careless' musical practices.

Figure 2.1 Hand-coloured engraving of T.D. Rice in the role of the Jim Crow stage-type by Thomas Dartmouth. Negative number 48912, Collection of The New-York Historical Society

The minstrel slave was caricatured as possessed by animal instincts that manifested as, among other proclivities, violent behaviour. A short excerpt from the minstrel song 'Ole Virginny Breakdown' illustrates this; the slave's supposed animality and pre-civilized state of existence is its subject:

> My mama was a wolf,
> My daddy was a tiger,
> I am what you call
> De Ole Virginny Nigger
> Half fire half smoke
> A little touch of thunder
> I am what you call
> De eighth wonder.[1]

[1] 'Ole Virginny Breakdown' (Boston, 1841), quoted in Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), p. 55.

The slave's violent disposition was a common theme as the multitude of verses for Jim Crow's signature tune 'Jim Crow' reveal. Jim Crow was especially proud of his physical strength and he took much pleasure in boasting of his adventures:

> I wip my weight in wildcats
> I eat an Alligator
> And tear up more ground
> Dan kifer 50 load of tater.[2]

In this regard and in their attempts to excel beyond all others, the Virginia Minstrels tested the boundaries of what was permissible on the public stage. The foursome was wild and boisterous. In 'Negro' dialect and dirty tone they sputtered, laughed and shouted animal-like vocables at great volume. As one English critic writing in 1846 observed of the group's tambourine player, Dick Pelham: 'Pelham exhibited "looks and movements comic beyond conception. He seemed animated by a savage energy; and [the handling of his instrument] … nearly wrung him off his seat. His white eyes rolled in a curious frenzy … and his hiccupping chuckles were unsurpassable."'[3] As the Virginia Minstrels loved to suggest, the slave was a lustful creature who indulged in wild and unconventional sexual exploits in keeping with his animality. Old Dan Tucker's signature song, composed by Emmett and among the most popular item on the Virginia Minstrels' programme, was an especially lewd portrayal of blackness: as well as being unrefined, violent and drunk, Dan Tucker was over-sexed. Jim Crow, meanwhile, had a keen, if not predatory eye for 'the ladies'. As an 1843 song sheet illustration of the Virginia Minstrels depicts, the foursome sat with legs spread apart, feet tapping vigorously and their blackened faces grimacing and contorting in a manner Eric Lott quite rightly identifies as masturbatory (see Figure 2.2).[4]

While the slave stage-type portrayed black male vulgarity on the minstrel stage, the dandy, his counterpart, ridiculed blackness in another way. A role often associated with George Washington Dixon (a contemporary of Rice), the northern black dandy (the black version of the urban white dandy) parodied free northern blacks' attempts at social betterment. With characters such as Zip Coon, Dandy Jim and Jim Brown, in stark contrast to the slave, the dandy was effeminate, refined and craved luxury. He usually wore neatly fitting pantaloons and waistcoat with signature blue velvet tails.[5] He wore a hat and gloves, usually made of silk, and often walked with a cane despite a confident strut (see Figure 2.3). Aspiring to the intellect, power and dignity associated with elite white men, the black dandy

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[2] 'Jim Crow' (New York: Firth and Hall, late 1820s), quoted in Nathan, *Dan Emmett*, p. 55.

[3] Anon., quoted in Nathan, *Dan Emmett*, p. 125.

[4] Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 138.

[5] This dandy character was immortalized in the Golliwog doll, ubiquitous as a children's toy into the 1970s.

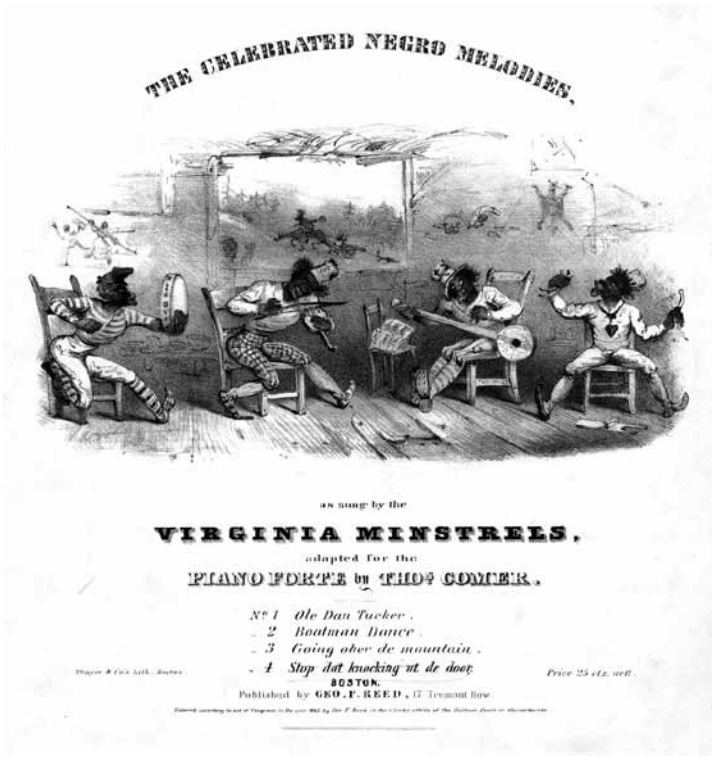
THE CELEBRATED NEGRO MELODIES,
as sung by the
VIRGINIA MINSTRELS,
adapted for the
PIANO FORTE by THO? COMER.
N? 1 Ole Dan Tucker.
2 Boatman Dance.
3 Going ober de mountain.
4 Stop dat knocking at de door.
BOSTON.
Published by GEO. P. REED, 17 Tremont Row.

Figure 2.2 The Virginia Minstrels, 1843

pranced upon the stage practising his airs and graces and pretensions. In skits and song texts filled with pompous expressions and malapropisms, the dandy attempted to master the language of 'larned' scholars, portrayed as a fruitless task. As this excerpt from 'Zip Coon' displays:

> I tell you what will happin den, now bery soon,
> De Nited States Bank will be blone to de moon;
> Dare General Jackson, will him lampoon,
> An de bery nex President, will be Zip Coon.
> An wen Zip Coon our President shall be,
> He make all de little Coons sing posum up a tree;
> O how de little Coons, will dance an sing,
> Wen he tie dare tails togedder, cross de lim dey swing.[6]

[6] 'Zip Coon' (New York: Atwill's, 1834), quoted in Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, p. 93.

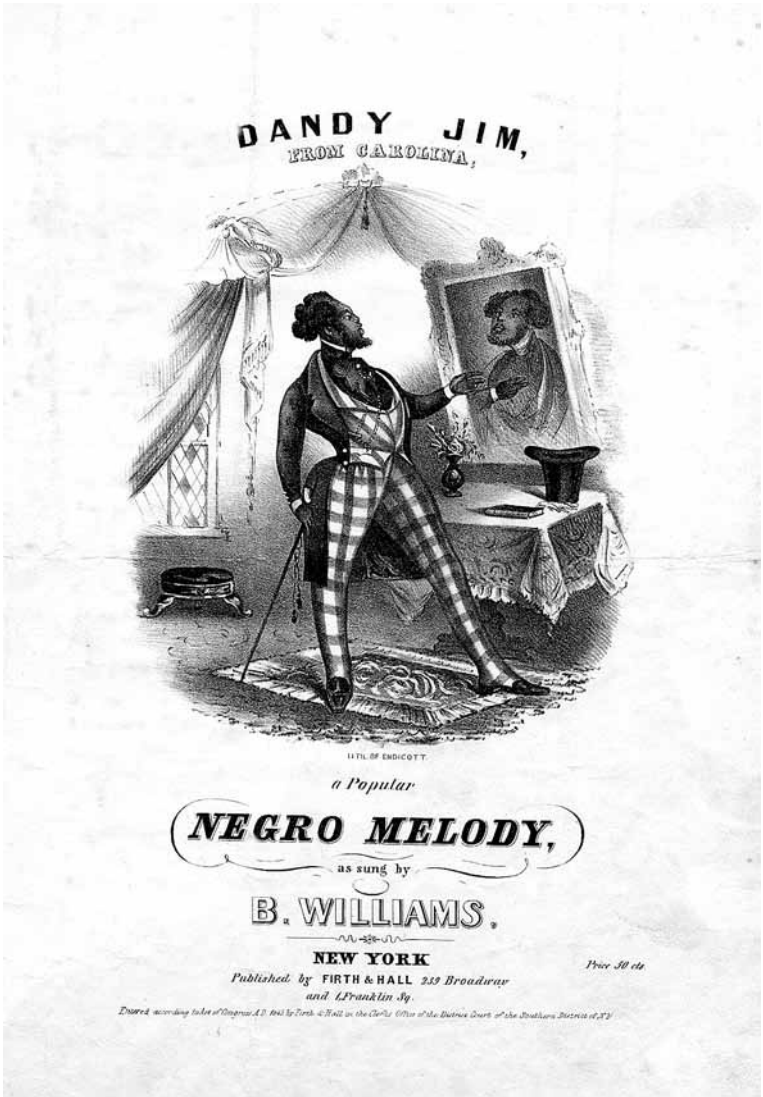

Figure 2.3 The black dandy stage-type Dandy Jim as depicted in an 1843 song sheet illustration

The dandy was a sociable man and attracted women, not in the slave's predatory way but through his charm and appearance. As this verse from one version of 'Dandy Jim of Caroline' reveals:

> I went one ebenin to de ball,
> Wid lips combed out an wool quite tall,
> De ladies eyes like snowballs shine,
> On dandy Jim ob Caroline.[7]

Minstrelsy's dance and performance practices

From its earliest guises, blackface minstrelsy was more about movement and dance than music and song, and the minstrel show was no exception. The major reason for this was so that it could foreground black bodiliness, and absent mind, in keeping with assertions of black animality and primitiveness. Dance was made a spectacle and so much so that some minstrel performers, including the renowned Juba and solo dancers John Smith and John Diamond, did not sing at all but instead focused on the execution of dance steps, moves, postures and facial expressions. Such routines became so skilfully characterized and choreographed that competitive performances emerged. Juba's sublime quality and style of dance, which was second to none, was something his paler contemporaries worked hard to emulate. As one London observer of Juba at Vauxhall Gardens in 1848 marvelled: '"How could he tie his legs into such knots," … "and fling them about so recklessly, or make his feet twinkle until you lose sight of them altogether in his energy."'[8]

The dances and gestures of the minstrel show functioned to tell as much about the characters as did the songs and skits, if not more so. As Hans Nathan explains in his early study of classic minstrel performance:

> The Negro minstrel was never more spontaneous and refreshingly direct than in his dances – his characteristic capers, steps, and gestures. With utter disregard for the genteel tradition of the urban stage and to the delight of the populace, he transferred to his art the loud gaiety of a low social stratum.[9]

In stark contrast to the more 'refined' and organized white dance traditions such as the hornpipe and jig that had hitherto prevailed in British and American theatres, minstrelsy's dance was spontaneous, uninhibited and immensely physical. A large variety of jumps and leaps were favourite features, such as the 'backaction spring', 'jaybird wing' and 'pigeon wing' – a wildly acrobatic jump in which the dancer,

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[7] 'Dandy Jim of Caroline' (Boston: Charles H. Keith, 1844), quoted in Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, p. 212. Because the dandy's parody involved at once lower-class blacks and an elite social class (reflecting the contemporaneous parvenu or nouveau riche convention), the figure became particularly effective in critiquing up the social scale as well as disparaging down it. Through this, the dandy character, among some publics, became an important vehicle for comment on matters of class as well as race. For the place of class in the understandings and functions of the blackface mask, see Chapter 1.

[8] Anon., quoted in Nathan, *Dan Emmett*, p. 73.

[9] Nathan, *Dan Emmett*, p. 70.

while in mid-air, kicked his legs together at the heels or ankles in a frog-like formation then fell dramatically to his knees (sometimes only to bounce up again to repeat the move). Dance and gesture were often bound to the texts of songs, with the inclusion of non-choreographic moves, or functioned as commentary to them. The latter was nowhere more evident than in Jim Crow's signature song, which, although varied among song-sheet editors and actors (as was commonplace with minstrel songs), always ended with the couplet: 'Weel about and turn about and do jis so / Ebery time I weel about, I jump Jim Crow', followed by a demonstrative 'weel'.

The dances of the minstrel show comprised a distinct collection of gestures characterized by an angular use of the body, certain jittering movements, wide-knee steps and overhead hand signals. This included the cocked knee, often accompanied by the opposite arm raised overhead, which was a staple gesture and in fact, along with the prominence of the heel (which parodied black people's supposedly 'elongated' feet), was iconic (see Figure 2.4). Dances were universal in their combination of upright poses (recalling the stiff frontal posture of African sculpture) with fluency and grace. As Nathan writes of Rice and his characteristic performance style, which was based on plantation frolics: 'How strained, sprawling, and distorted his posture was, and yet how nonchalant – how unusually grotesque with its numerous sharp angles, and yet how natural!'[10] As well as the dance steps of the plantation, minstrels also parodied the movements enacted by slaves in church, one of the few social havens for blacks in antebellum life and where they were thus thought to be particularly uninhibited and excitable. As Nathan concurs (in a description that shows its age): 'when religious emotion seized upon [slaves'] minds, they would think nothing of throwing themselves into convulsions, or of wallowing on the ground and propelling themselves into the air'.[11] Minstrels' re-enactment of such behaviour also involved a deep concentration, ridiculing what Nathan describes as the 'ceremonial introversion' slaves displayed when attending church.[12]

The steps of minstrel dance were almost entirely made up of rapid movements; in fact, it was very rare that slow steps would be included at all. An immense variety was packed into its dances: John Diamond's 'Rattle Snake Jig' was said to feature as many as 120 different steps in its attempt to emulate and make fun of the 'whirlwind' style of black dance. Among the most ubiquitous steps was the 'single shuffle', usually performed twice as a 'double shuffle' and varied by more competent dancers. In its original form it is believed the shuffle was a repeated brush of the floor with the foot, though it later developed more into a sliding motion performed in a forward and then backward direction. The 'long j bow' was also a sliding movement and involved the gliding forward of the right leg on its heel so that the foot was at a sharp right angle to the floor (forming a tilting

[10] Ibid., p. 52.

[11] Ibid., p. 82.

[12] Ibid., p. 83.

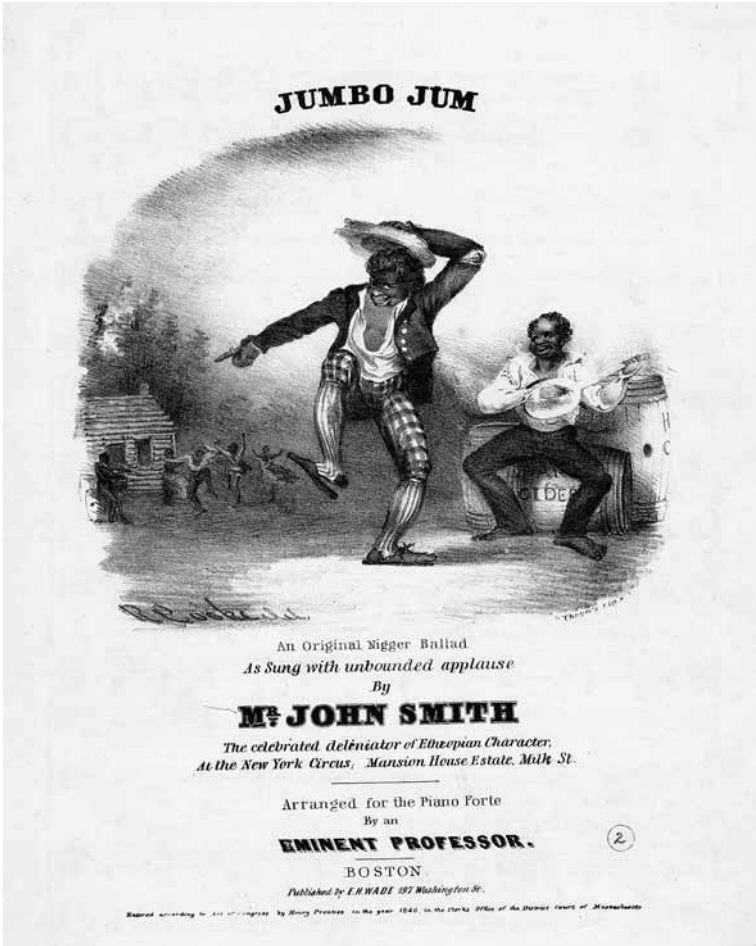

Figure 2.4 The cocked knee in minstrel dance as depicted in an 1840 song sheet illustration

'J' shape). Sliding movements both forward and back, and sliding steps such as the 'Virginia essence', were among the favourite of minstrel moves.

The striking of the toe and heel featured heavily: Diamond was renowned for his promise to dance 'the greatest display of toe and heel genus [genius] ever witnessed'. Typical Diamond dances such as 'Long Island Breakdown' and 'Smoke House Dance' relied almost exclusively on the performer's toe–heel. The protruding heel in particular was a central feature of black caricature in minstrel dance as well as in its iconography: as already noted, black men and women were depicted as having gigantic feet, often with flapping heels, and this was exaggerated in its dance (as 'Jim Along Josey' declares, 'De ambition that dis nigger feels /

Is showing de science of his heels').[13] Dances were usually punctuated by toe stands to emphasize the heels as they pointed upward. These were sometimes followed by the placement of weight on the heels in preparation for a toe–heel rock, while some dancers ran forward on both heels in a running movement known as 'tracking upon the heel'. Spins, or as they were referred to in song 'weels', relied on the heel as a pivot, exemplified best by Jim Crow's signature twirl.

Such footwork on the stage floor made for quite complex sound patterns, especially when combined with finger clicking, hand clapping and a variety of vocables. Combined, these functioned as percussive accompaniment to musical numbers and became integral to the performance of some songs: in 'Stop Dat Knocking' the line 'Who dar knocking at the door?' was answered by the tapping of the performer's foot on the stage floor. Certain sound patterns, such as those generated by the 'walking jawbone', were routinely showcased in 'heel solos'. Such rhythms were later amplified by clogs or, as in the case of the 'Juba' dance, by screwing pennies onto the heels of the dancer's shoes (the practice that marked the beginnings of modern tap as we know it). Even the solo banjoist, who featured in most minstrel shows by the end of the 1830s, did not stay still despite the restrictions imposed by his instrument. At the very least he tapped a foot, its resonance on the boards of the stage adding a valuable percussive effect. A large repertoire of vocalizations was drawn upon too. In gross exaggeration of the soundtrack that could be heard as slaves shucked corn or dug fields, grunts, yells and curses (including the typical elisions of black dialect) were shouted, often with some menace. This conflation of corporeal and sonic elements recalled the African 'ring shout' call and response holy dance, brought to America by slaves, in which participants, dancing in a ring, stamped and shuffled their feet, slapped their bodies and shouted to create complex percussive effects.

Decoding the mask of the classic minstrel show

Blackface minstrelsy held centre stage in popular culture for many decades and was enjoyed up and down the social strata in various contexts, only one of which was the professional theatre. The tradition thus sustained a wide variety of meanings but with regard to those of its classic theatrical form, as consumed by the white upper classes, minstrelsy was grounded in dominant racist ideology, which distanced, differenced and inferiorized blacks to effectively serve white needs. As vast numbers of blacks were brought within unprecedented proximity to whites, classic minstrelsy dealt with the white anxiety this aroused among the middle and upper classes: the minstrel show controlled blackness by strict definition into caricatures to be ridiculed. These caricatures further eased white fears by distancing and disconnecting blacks from whites as much as possible by marking them out in strict opposition – the typical approach to racial difference at the time. This was the era in which the American School of Ethnology argued for the place

[13] 'Jim Along Josey' (New York, 1840), quoted in Nathan, *Dan Emmett*, p. 73.

for 'polygenesis' in racial understanding: the belief in the separate creation of races as distinctly different species.

Through a process of definition by opposition, driven by a white narcissistic desire, the 'respectability' of whiteness could be firmly reiterated. Minstrelsy at once confirmed black subservience and white superiority, for the minstrel was always the antithesis of his audience and the white man behind the mask. The minstrel was primitive and savage, the audience human and civilized; the minstrel was oversexed and boisterous, the audience reserved and restrained; the minstrel was criminal and dangerous, the audience trustworthy and unthreatening; the minstrel was poorly and deprived, the audience affluent (if not in monetary terms then at least in moral ones); and so on. Beneath the bravado, minstrelsy and its caricatures dealt not simply with white fear in a new social context of close racial proximity but more specifically with white doubt and self-consciousness.

While the minstrel show reflected the racial structure in the 'real world' of slavery, it also worked to assuage a white unease over the same, for slavery very overtly undermined the creed on which America had hitherto prided itself: that every individual had the right to equality, advancement and upward mobility. Minstrelsy dealt with this conflict at the heart of slavery through its images of the slave's contentment and the dandy's stupidity: the slave suggested black people were happy on the plantation while the dandy illustrated how they were hopeless outside it. In its slave stage-type the minstrel show also worked to assuage white unease over the extreme exploitation blacks suffered at the hands of white masters by the projection of black savagery and specifically bodiliness, physical strength and absent mind. In minstrelsy, the black man *was* a body.

But despite its racism, which strongly endorsed dominant racial understanding, the classic minstrel show was, ironically, a public acknowledgement of, even fascination with, the blackness, and black body, it kept controlled and distanced: minstrelsy was an effective means by which its actors and audiences could actually *engage* with and enjoy blackness, which was otherwise firmly condemned, particularly in the lives of the 'respectable' upper classes. The minstrel show likely allowed the covert expression of an attraction to blackness. It is possible minstrels also acted as a kind of catharsis and escape – what popular theatre has always been about. Paradoxically, as part of this, whites were able to actually play with and negotiate the white identity minstrelsy was consolidating. As Nathan Huggins writes of its actors: 'White men put on black masks and became another self, one which was loose of limb, innocent of obligation to anything outside itself, indifferent to success (for whom success was impossible by racial definition), and thus a creature totally devoid of tension and deep anxiety.'[14] Envy certainly boiled up into the mix and even the exploration of homosexual desire, persuasively argued for in numerous accounts of the tradition.[15]

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[14] Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, p. 253.

[15] For the discussion of the place of homosexual expression in minstrelsy, see Chapter 7.

Minstrelsy provided an acceptable cover to try on black bodies, though accounts suggest that the grotesque portrayals were usually stepped up in an attempt to ease the guilt that manifested as a result. Indeed, these elements of desire and racial permeability did little to mitigate the racism at the heart of the minstrel show. While whites played with and consumed blackness, black men and women remained unable to associate themselves with whites and whiteness and were denied the luxury in real life to be anything other than the grotesque caricatures projected onto them from the minstrel stage from which they were prohibited. While the black caricatures of the minstrel show embodied a degree of tension in racial feeling – dread on the one hand, fascination and desire on the other – they were nevertheless ultimately about a racist ideology in which whites used blacks to serve their own ends. This was allowed by white control over blackness and the firm denial of black self-representation. Blackface minstrelsy's classic guise was motivated and defined by a host of white anxieties, demands and desires. To paraphrase Huggins, the minstrel show worked as an effective mode to white psychological peace.[16]

Part II: Michael Jackson and the blackface mask

> History – especially music history, I like to think – is not just something we study; it's something we live.[17]

> The job of criticism is not to scorn or judge gestures but to find some way to live up to them, to grasp at their implications … for they have survived all their judges, as they will us.[18]

In the figure of Michael Jackson, and specifically his distinct dance style, iconography and visuals, is the legacy of classic minstrelsy – its dance steps, gestures and imagery. The remainder of this chapter looks specifically at Jackson's 'Black or White' single and its accompanying video in this regard. Then, by examining the receptions to 'Black or White', we shall see further how this lode weighs just as heavily in the popular mind. Largely for the images of black masculinity rooted in minstrelsy it projected, 'Black or White' received worldwide criticism. Unfortunately this is not evidence that these ideas of black maleness are no longer acceptable but rather that when presented in a contextual frame that promises critique, they are condemned, revealing a deep contradiction. Extrapolating from this, the case of Jackson and 'Black or White' provides a crude example of how the hegemonic pop industry and contemporary popular culture more broadly works in a racist framework that limits black entertainers by

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16 The term Huggins uses is 'psychic peace'. Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, p. 300.

17 Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, p. 12.

18 Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 226.

disavowal of their self-representation and expression. This was the process at the heart of the classic minstrel show.

'Black or White'

A call for cross-racial brotherhood, Jackson's 'Black or White' (1991) is complemented by an elaborate video that was directed by John Landis, director of Jackson's monumental *Thriller* video of 1983. Released ahead of its album *Dangerous*, 'Black or White' was broadcast on 14 November 1991 across twenty-seven countries simultaneously via Fox broadcasting, MTV and Black Entertainment Television (BET). The video drew an estimated 500 million viewers, the largest audience for a music video ever. But despite the worldwide interest and the song's happy message of racial harmony – that it doesn't matter if you're black or white – Jackson's primetime premiere generated immediate uproar due to the final segment of the video after the song's close: the essentially non-musical, now iconic 'panther dance'.

The video opens with a prolonged, non-musical introduction set in a white American suburb. The spectator follows the camera as it speeds down a street into a cosy family home where a young white kid (played by child film star Macaulay Culkin) angers his father by playing his heavy metal music 'too late and too loud'. With his speakers cranked up in revenge, the boy then blasts his ignorant father up through the roof into an orbit reminiscent of *ET*, only to land, still in armchair, in the heat and dust of Africa. The main body of the video, along with the song itself, starts here, with the father's surprise landing that goes on to form the first scene of a swiftly moving series of lip-synching Michael Jacksons performing various national dances. While the song's lyrics denounce racism, Jackson visualizes the artifice of racial difference as he leaps from 'country' to 'country' (with appropriately changing sets) to join in the moves and steps of the various dancers he finds on the way: hot, ebony-skinned warriors performing a Watusi dance in the 'African' dust; a posse of dancing Balinese girls; Native Americans dressed as Hollywood Indians in a film shoot set in the American West; a solitary Indian girl on the central reservation of an urban freeway; and a troupe of Russian Cossack dancers performing a Kazotsky kick in falling snow. 'Jackson becomes an Everyman for the late twentieth century – a global citizen', as Tamara Roberts describes it and indeed as he dances their dances he seems equally at home in each of the 'countries' into which he leaps.[19]

The sequence is interrupted as Jackson and the Russians freeze to transform into miniature figurines inside a snow globe being played with by two babies – one black, the other white – sitting atop a model of planet earth. This saccharine image then cuts abruptly to the song's harder-edged bridge section. Jackson now sings of his frustration – 'I'm tired of this stuff' – but also of his defiance – 'I ain't scared of

[19] Tamara Roberts, 'Michael Jackson's Kingdom: Music, Race, and the Sound of the Mainstream', *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 23/1 (2011): 19-39, at p. 33.

no sheets' referring to Ku Klux Klan intimidation. As he sings with marked vocal attack, Jackson struts through flames behind which flash news bulletin images of war and KKK rallies with burning crosses. This then gives way to shots of Jackson back in America on an urban sidewalk with a group of kids dressed in hip hop attire. One of these is Culkin, who lip-synchs the words to the song's rap segment, which tells of Jackson's determination not to be limited by race and concludes: 'I'm not gonna spend my life being a colour'.

This is then followed by what could be seen as the final scene of the sequence of dancing Jacksons as the singer for the first time dances alone his own familiar dance, in preparation for the song's outro. As the camera pans backward, Jackson is revealed to be performing atop the Statue of Liberty, which is surrounded by, and out-sizes by far, the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, Big Ben and other such famous monuments. The song closes to the enthralling, much-recognized computerized morphing sequence – outstanding for its time – in which multiple faces of different races and both genders merge from one into the next, each head bobbing to the beat, smiling and lip-synching to Jackson's repetition of the song's closing pronouncement, 'It's black, it's white / It's tough for you to get by'. The morphing relay retrospectively endorses the message of the 'ethnic' dance sequence – that identity is fluid, not different or separate, and that we can all live in happy coexistence. The final face of the relay, at the song's close as a director shouts 'Cut!', is that of a black American woman; and as the camera retreats a soundstage and film crew are revealed. The camera pans the studio. The crew relax and move about, and the video seamlessly slips into its final part: the panther postlude. It is this section that has a strong relation to the tradition of classic blackface minstrelsy and its legacy.

The panther postlude: a minstrel dance

The panther postlude begins with the real black panther lurking amid the video's set – out of context but unnoticed. It heads to a fire exit from which it leaves the first-floor film studio and pads down some wrought-iron steps to the night-time backstreet below. Once on the deserted street, the panther then metamorphoses into Jackson who is classically attired in tipped fedora, black shirt and signature armband, wrist splint, ankle-cut pants and polished loafers. The empty street in which he now finds himself has the feeling of a film set itself: there is something highly reminiscent of Gene Kelly's famous street scene in the Hollywood classic *Singin' in the Rain* though the mood is much less cheery.[20] In contrast to the vibrant colours of the main video, the only light now comes from a streetlamp, and the street, when not in shadow, has been given a blue and white hue. The street is silent but for the sounds of its surroundings and those generated by Jackson himself as he moves. Although an obvious backstreet, there is a hotel front – The Royal Arms

[20] The panther postlude has been analysed as a film-noir version of this scene. See Carol J. Clover, 'Dancin' in the Rain', *Critical Inquiry*, 21/4 (1995): 722-47. See also Chapter 5.

– which is neglected and lifeless. A single sheet from a discarded newspaper, and other sparse debris, lies on the bitumen that is wet from rain. There is a parked-up automobile and a trashcan.

It is here in the shadows when the real show seems to be over that Jackson finally showcases his own characteristic dance. With considerably longer takes than earlier and with heightened audibility, in this dark city backstreet Jackson performs a long solitary display of his own collection of twitches, kicks, spins and shrugs. The dance is truly spectacular – reinforcing that Jackson was a virtuosic dancer (and also a talented actor). Yet while, with the exception of some direct panther simulations, Jackson's steps, gestures, moves and persona are those we recognize as his, their history is deeply rooted in the tradition of blackface minstrelsy. It is this history, as much as the talents of Jackson himself, that is showcased in this four-minute postlude.

In what was apparently intended to be the interpretation of the animalistic instincts of the panther, Jackson theatricalizes the rigid set of attributes that white antebellum minstrels projected onto black people and especially black men. Not quite human, not fully animal, Jackson exhibits all the bestial traits expected of him as a black man: unpredictable, violent, criminal and over-sexed. Jackson runs amok: he sabotages property, shouts, screams and 'roars'. In his wildness, Jackson is shown as most certainly a lustful creature: not only does he repeatedly grab his crotch (one of his favourite gestures), but he also gyrates at the pelvis, contorts his face into grimaces of sexual gratification, rubs his chest in a highly erotic and masturbatory manner and zips up his pants in a central shot atop the roof of an automobile. Established from the postlude's outset, with the surprise digital metamorphosis from the panther, is Jackson's sheer unpredictability. This is compounded by the soft wind as it blows up without warning and as a cat jumps out from the trashcan to send its lid clattering on the bitumen. Furthermore, in his dance, Jackson picks up whatever comes to hand, and he responds to his surroundings to endorse a sense of spontaneity and non-choreography. As if to confirm that blacks can turn nasty, as well as being inherently criminal, the shots of Jackson dancing light-footed in a flash give way to him running amok smashing the automobile's windshield – first with his bare arm then with a crowbar – and hurling the trashcan into the window of the Royal Arms Hotel. Yet despite all this destruction, at the postlude's close when Jackson morphs back into his original panther form, he pads nonchalantly away from the street, turning his head only once as he goes. Like the slave caricature of minstrelsy, Jackson has no moral or social conscience.

It is not only Jackson's savagery that links his performance to the tradition of blackface minstrelsy but also, quite clearly, his dance. Throughout the postlude, among the most persistent qualities of Jackson's virtuosic dancing body is its fluidity. Although tightly choreographed and no doubt filmed with extreme precision (among those who worked with him Jackson was renowned for his insistence on multiple takes that ran into the hundreds and thousands), the routine appears natural and spontaneous. However, coupled with this is Jackson's body's

almost ubiquitous angularity, stiff poise and posture; his body's 'non-fluidity'. This pairing – graceful on the one hand yet almost awkward and upright on the other – was the same that traditional minstrels used to great effect in parody of the 'natural' movements of black people.

Figure 2.5 Jackson's wide-knee steps in the panther postlude, from 'Black or White'

The angulated limbs of nineteenth-century minstrel dance – including wide-knee and cocked-knee steps – are just as common in Jackson's dance. At one key moment, with wind in his shirt, Jackson ceremoniously stands in the street before launching into an elaborate showcase of the wide knee. This section of choreography, which is largely tap-based, is punctuated with kicks, hat tilts, hand claps and crotch grabs. Yet all the while Jackson's knees are open wide (see Figure 2.5). In alternation with the tap steps, Jackson gesticulates the wide-knee step of minstrelsy as he moves in a sideways direction alternating toes in, toes out, so that his knees are no sooner wide open than poked in. This sequence of tap and wide knees is repeated after he jumps atop the automobile in simulation of a cat's weightlessness. Furthermore, when Jackson leaps from the car's roof to its bonnet we see the customary 'frog-like' legs of others before him (see Figure 2.6 and recall Figure 2.4 in which the frog formation of the minstrel's legs is mirrored by the dancing figures behind him and in the banjo player's pose).

Figure 2.6 Jackson's frog-like leaps, from 'Black or White'

As already noted, Jackson's choreography, particularly of the feet, is dominated for large portions of the dance by rapid moves in a style not only close to tap but also remarkably like that of the very best minstrel dancers: one might recall Juba, whose feet, in his vigorous footwork, 'twinkled' until you lost sight of them. In his own high-energy dance, Jackson packs a huge repertoire of steps into every twist and turn (quite possibly to rival the minstrel dancer John Diamond's 120-step

'Rattle Snake Jig'!). Though danced with razor-sharp precision, these multiple and complex steps seamlessly interweave.

Set to the background of recorded silence – the almost inaudible creek of a back-alley gate and the hush of the subdued wind – it is these tap-like moves, along with the other sounds generated by Jackson, that create the soundtrack to the dance. All amplified, the insistent tapping of toe and heel on the bitumen together with hand claps, knee and chest slaps, finger clicks and vocables (including gasps, puffs, pants and lip-synched panther roars) culminate to form a complex rhythmic counterpoint. Reminiscent of the ring shout brought to the New World by slaves, this self-made accompaniment echoes many of those that were created and celebrated on the minstrel boards of nineteenth-century popular theatre. As the panther postlude contains no music as such Jackson's expression through dance and the sounds it creates is made all the more central: for the spectator, there is no hiding place from the powerful character Jackson portrays.[21]

Perhaps unsurprisingly with all its tap, the shots of the panther dance recurrently privilege Jackson's dancing feet and, more specifically, steps that emphasize the heel. This is established as early as the second pose that Jackson strikes: right hand on hat, knees bent low and heel skyward in a left toe point. The pose is held under spotlight in a distinctly long take and the camera slowly pans him (see Figure 2.7). While there remains neither the time nor the place for the much-celebrated moonwalk, this is not the case for the toe stand, one of Jackson's favourite poses and which, like the toe point, draws the eye to the heel.[22] This comes as the dance draws to its climax: with soles exposed and heels pointing upward, Jackson holds the pose blackface minstrels held in exaggeration of the slave's protruding, often grotesquely flapping heel.

The climax of Jackson's solitary dance, by which time he has whipped himself up into a violent rage, is a sublime spin on both heels. A sudden fall to the knees onto the wet bitumen intercepts. The fall is filmed in slow motion with overlapping takes that repeat the image from varying angles so that the number of rotations is multiplied beyond belief and the drama heightened as Jackson roars. Though more sober than Jim Crow's weeling and turning and doing 'jis so', Jackson's spin (by his own admission adopted after observing soul legends James Brown and Jackie Wilson as a child) nevertheless recalls the minstrel slave's turn, for which the heel

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[21] As with the classic minstrel show, performance for Jackson was not merely about music and song but also about characterization and expression through movement and dance. He was more than the King of Pop, he was a king of dance and theatre and so much so that he had no choice but to lip-synch in most live performances.

[22] It seems quite likely that the moonwalk is the evolution of the 'long j bow' and/or 'Virginia essence' of the minstrel show. It became known as the 'backslide' performed in silent movies and was later adopted by, among others, the black tap dancer Bill Bailey (see, for example, his performance in the Hollywood musical *Cabin in the Sky*, 1943). It was also a move that featured in routines by Cholly Atkins of the 1950s tap duo Coles and Atkins, who later became a key choreographer at Motown.

Figure 2.7 Jackson's second pose, from 'Black or White'

was used as a pivot. The dramatic collapse, which leaves Jackson on his knees, roaring some more and ripping his shirt (into the rags of Jim Crow?), may also be a reminder of minstrel representation: without warning antebellum minstrels fell to their knees in exaggeration of black religious ecstasy, intense emotional investment or simple unpredictability. As with Pelham of the Virginia Minstrels, who nearly 'wrung' himself off his seat in his excitability, Jackson is driven by a savage energy: armed with the territorial instincts of the male cat, he is literally a man possessed.

The panther postlude: reception and critical interpretation

Even though the panther postlude came attached to a song and video promoting racial unity (including a bridge section hinting at Jackson's real frustration with race relations), any serious message that it might have carried was dismissed. Instead, universal condemnation broke out as Jackson came under immediate fire. Both public and media alike attacked the panther postlude to 'Black or White' for being the indulgence of gratuitous violence and implied masturbatory sex. The uproar 'Black or White' generated forced Fox Broadcasting, which had initially cleared the video for air, to release a statement recognizing its decision had been in error. In response to quickly mounting pressure, Jackson also released a statement within an hour of the video's primetime broadcast in which he acknowledged he was a role model and apologized: 'I deeply regret any pain or hurt that the final segment of "Black or White" has caused children, their parents or any other viewers.'[23]

While concerned parents worried for their children, the media was no less forgiving. Critics questioned the purpose of the panther segment, seeing it as unnecessary or, rather more sceptically, nothing but a well-conceived publicity stunt ahead of the release of *Dangerous* (two weeks later on 26 November 1991). Jon Pareles, writing for *The New York Times*, typically could not see any point, denigrating Jackson and describing the panther postlude as, among other things, 'a noisy self-indulgence'.[24] Meanwhile, Chris Willman in his review for *The LA Times* concluded that the video was 'mind-bogglingly inane' and reduced the panther postlude to nothing more noteworthy than 'another few minutes of Jackson' and 'nonsensical violence'.[25]

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[23] Michael Jackson, quoted in Cynthia J. Fuchs, 'Michael Jackson's Penis', in Philip Brett, Sue-Ellen Case and Susan Foster (eds), *Cruising the Performative: Interventions into the Representations of Ethnicity, Nationality and Sexuality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 13-33, at p. 24.

[24] Jon Pareles, 'New Video Opens the Jackson Blitz', at http://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/16/arts/review-rock-new-video-opens-the-jackson-blitz.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm [accessed 2 March 2012].

[25] Chris Willman, 'Michael's Video Takes Beating; 4 Minutes Cut', at http://articles.latimes.com/1991-11-16/entertainment/ca-1629_1_michael-jackson-video [accessed 2 March 2012].

The negative responses to the 'Black or White' postlude were significant and not least because they were so wildly disproportionate. 'Black or White' came three months after children's TV star Pee Wee Herman (Paul Reubens) had been caught masturbating in a Sarasota porn theatre and a year after Madonna had masturbated on stage to 'Like a Virgin'.[26] Moreover, gangsta rap was seeing a sharp rise in mainstream popularity. Led by Niggaz With Attitude (NWA) and Ice Cube (former member of NWA who had left in pursuit of a solo career), gangsta rap was exploring themes of street-gang life: violence, homophobia, rape and vandalism. By comparison 'Black or White' was mildly explicit.

As Jackson's rage in the solo panther dance was condemned for being gratuitous or simply inexplicable, the postlude was swiftly re-cut. In an effort to make the violence more intelligible, racist graffiti was digitally added onto the automobile and hotel windows that Jackson destroys: in the re-cut, Jackson hurls the crowbar through the words 'nigger go home' and 'no more wetbacks' on the car's windshield and shatters with the trashcan the message 'KKK rules' sprayed onto the hotel window. Despite these additions, however, subsequent airings of the video at the time routinely removed the entire segment altogether, and this remains the case over two decades later. As since discovered by others, it remains difficult to locate the original graffiti-free version of the video at all, and that includes on compilation DVDs produced by Jackson himself as well as by the Jackson Estate.

The widespread dismissal that Jackson had anything serious to say about race in the postlude was particularly marked given that in it Jackson allies himself with a black panther. Invoking the black American Civil Rights group that emerged in the 1960s, the Black Panther Party of Self Defence, Jackson's standpoint and the reason for his rage should have been clear.[27] Pareles in particular went out of his way to disavow this symbolism only relating the panther to a fondness on Jackson's part for wildcats (for on the back of the *Thriller* album cover Jackson had posed with a tiger cub). What's more, as a black American man in

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[26] Fuchs, 'Michael Jackson's Penis', p. 24.

[27] The Black Panther Party of Self Defence was formed in 1966 in direct response to the police brutality that was being routinely committed against blacks at the time, such as the case of the unarmed Guinean immigrant Amadou Diallo, shot 41 times by New York police. The Party set an example of revolutionary activism that was energized further in 1968 by the assassination of Martin Luther King. The Party saw endless conflict in its quest for Civil Rights with rallies and riots resulting in arson, sabotage, violence and death. But their militancy was provoked, not provocative, as co-founder Bobby Seale once explained: 'if you drive a panther into a corner, if he can't go left and he can't go right, then he will tend to come out of that corner to wipe out or stop his aggressor'. Bobby Seale, quoted in Gary Younge, 'By Any Means Necessary', at http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2003/aug/08/festivals [accessed 11 October 2010]. At the time of 'Black or White', the Party's leader Elma 'Geronimo' Pratt was serving a prison sentence in California for the first-degree murder of a white school teacher, a case proven in 1972 to be based on insubstantial evidence almost immediately after Pratt's conviction, which was finally overturned in 1997.

the early 1990s, Jackson had much to be enraged about: only a few months prior to the release of 'Black or White' the case of Rodney King (the innocent black man pulped by Los Angeles police officers) revealed ongoing issues of police brutality and racial profiling; and Affirmative Action (the set of public policies and initiatives set up to eliminate discrimination based on race, colour, religion and sex in the late 1970s) was being met with significant opposition among conservatives (who saw its policies as preferential treatment). But not even Jackson's closing pronouncement 'Prejudice is Ignorance' – superimposed onto a close-up shot of the singer – banged home at the close of the video was a clear enough message.

Jackson's full-frontal attack on racial ignorance seemed to be denied by all but one commentator: the black film critic Armond White, whose article on 'Black or White', 'The Gloved One is Not a Chump', featured in *The City Sun* shortly after the video's premiere. In stark contrast to the prevailing popular readings of the panther dance, White saw its significance. In discussion of the less than warm reception of the premiere, White wrote of the problem:

> [Jackson's] solo dance forced the American public to look at the underside of its benighted racial fantasies and to recognize the unruly feelings inside its most popular entertainer. No other African-American artist has dared such a thing (certainly not on the scale of *Black or White*), and no comparably popular white artist has even tried.[28]

For Armond White, 'Black or White' marked a watershed moment in his relationship with the singer: White's former sceptical opinion of Jackson had transformed into one of admiration.[29]

Following White's lead, more astute critical readings of 'Black or White' have slowly emerged; though well outside the popular press and mainstream publications and most notably not until after Jackson's death.[30] In tune with White's interpretation, these more recent appraisals universally acknowledge that while the main portion of the video projects a utopian vision in race relations, the

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[28] Armond White, 'The Gloved One is Not a Chump', in Armond White, *Keep Moving: The Michael Jackson Chronicles* (Washington DC: Resistance Works, 2009), pp. 19-30, at p. 25.

[29] 'The Gloved One is Not a Chump', which later won the ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award for music criticism, features in White's self-published collection of essays that was produced after Jackson's death (*Keep Moving: The Michael Jackson Chronicles*). Together for the first time, White's essays display the development through the years of their author's personal relationship with Jackson, which moves from one based on scepticism to empathy and alliance.

[30] As well as the aforementioned essays by Carol J. Clover, Armond White and Tamara Roberts, see Elizabeth Chin, 'Michael Jackson's Panther Dance: Double Consciousness and the Uncanny Business of Performing While Black', *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 23/1 (2011): 58-74.

postlude projects the less-than joyful reality. As Elizabeth Chin describes, while the morphing coda is revealed at its close to be nothing but a production number allowed only through technology, the black panther which then comes into view is wholly real, as is the dark alley: 'the real world is out there, outside that [studio] door that leads into the street'.[31] As part of this reality, the postlude expresses Jackson's dissatisfaction – his unresolved angst and rage. Coming after images of interracial happiness and Jackson's repeated assertion that 'it don't matter if you're black or white' the panther dance is charged with the rage and attack because in real life it does continue to matter. The contrast between the main video and the panther dance, (mis)understood to be irrelevant and unintelligible, is, in fact, entirely congruent and fundamental. And indeed, despite his initial, very public, guarded explanation of the meaning of the postlude – that it was the simple interpretation of the panther – Jackson, well after the hoopla, in 2006, admitted quite freely, though to a much smaller audience, this had been what it had meant:

> I said, 'I want to do a dance number where I can let out my frustration about injustice and prejudice and racism and bigotry,' and within the dance I became upset and let go. I think at the time people were concerned with the violent content of the piece, but it's, like, easy to look at. It's simple.[32]

The minstrel audience of today

If we understand the panther dance in relation to the classic minstrel show, the popular response to it reveals a distinct change, in fact complete turnabout, in minstrel comfort levels. For as the negative attacks on 'Black or White' reveal, minstrelsy's key elements of black savagery, including violence, sex and criminality, are now no longer acceptable. Jackson in the panther dance acts out ideas of blackness constructed on the minstrel stage by and for whites yet his faithful adherence to these today is apparently intolerable: Jackson's chest rubbing and fly zipping are punishable offences yet were the sort of black male masturbatory signs that had been adored in classic minstrel caricature. The negative response is contradictory not only because Jackson is giving others outside his own subjectivity what they traditionally constructed, desired and enjoyed but also because such notions concerning blackness and especially black masculinity still inform popular ideas about the same today.

Studies and statistics together routinely show this. With extraordinary parallels with minstrelsy's ideas of black maleness, contemporary white hegemonic media representation projects black men as excessively bodily – sexual and athletic.

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[31] Chin, 'Michael Jackson's Panther Dance', p. 66.

[32] Michael Jackson, quoted in Jocelyn Vena, 'Michael Jackson's Video Legacy, in His Own Words', at http:www.mtv.com/news/articles/1615239/20090702/jackson_michael.jhtml [accessed 2 March 2012].

Consequently, black male and female icons rarely rise from outside the spheres of dance, music and sport in which they can apparently excel with a natural bodiliness rather than intellectual ability. Hip hop and sport remain the central most public arenas in which black bodies are seen. Similarly telling of the legacy of minstrelsy's black myths is the fact that America's First Lady, Michelle Obama, has repeatedly found herself depicted as 'an angry black woman'. Meanwhile the reports and images of Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates's house arrest in 2009 tell of the persistent belief in and projection of the potential for black rage, as well as criminality: the black professor was arrested for breaking into his own home after a white middle-class female neighbour, mistaking Gates for a burglar, tipped off police. As statistics show that young black men both in America and Britain remain disproportionately diagnosed with schizophrenia, it seems the notion of black male unpredictability remains prevalent.

In an essay that explores the limitations imposed on black masculinity today (through the change in Michael Jackson's expression of sexuality from child to adult star), Andreana Clay argues how, from as early as childhood, black maleness is 'adulterated'. Appropriated from Ann Arnett Ferguson's ethnographic research into elementary schools in the San Francisco Bay area, 'adulteration' is the term Clay uses to describe the imprinting of ideas – including criminal, violent and hypersexual proclivities – onto black bodies by others.[33] This adulteration was exactly what minstrelsy was about and is the process sociologist, writer and black cultural leader W.E.B. Du Bois refers to as the 'veil': his metaphor for the choking definitions of blackness from 'outside'.[34] In her account of what the reality is for black youths today Clay writes: 'In this cultural landscape, the ideology of "boys will be boys" is replaced with (Black) boys will be, at the very least, violent, if not vicious (sexual) predators, who will either physically or socially die by the time they are twenty-one.'[35] To illustrate this, Clay uses the young Michael Jackson of the Jackson Five, whose prepubescent authoritative sexual display – hypermasculine and oversexualized – was accepted, and even celebrated, among his audience while his later versions of manhood, which denied these qualities,

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[33] Andreane Clay, 'Working Day and Night: Black Masculinity and the King of Pop', *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 23/1 (2011): 3-18. See also Ann Arnett Ferguson, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

[34] The metaphor of the veil is the recurring theme through W.E.B. Du Bois's renowned collection of semi-autobiographical essays, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1989).

[35] Clay, 'Working Day and Night', p. 4. In keeping with contemporary discourses around black masculinity more broadly, by 'social death' Clay means incarceration, as almost one in ten young black American men is in prison today. Gary Younge, 'For Too Many African-Americans, Prison is a Legacy Passed from Father to Son', at http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jan/15/jail-reflects-collapse-black-communities-us [accessed 2 February 2012].

were ridiculed.[36] Stereotypes of blackness today, which over-define, difference and inferiorize, have barely changed since the classic minstrel show.

While worried audiences condemned the panther dance, broadcasters excised it and Jackson was forced to edit its offensive parts, the denial of black expression was under way, also true to minstrel convention. As Jackson later put it, the meaning of the postlude was 'simple', but the fact that it was read as being entirely not simple was because Jackson's audience was unprepared to address what it really expressed: black subjectivity – black rage – born from racial frustration apparently too difficult or dangerous to acknowledge. While Jackson's rage should have been accepted (after all, unpredictable black violent anger is what whites have traditionally wanted) Jackson dared express it in his own terms and in a context – the meaning of 'Black or White' more broadly – that promised critique. What's more, this critique was being put out by America's most famous and successful black man in a typically elaborate style, at great expense and preceded by characteristic Jackson-hype.[37]

In true minstrel style, Jackson's self-expression and representation were effectively re-written by others so that his rage at racism became a nonsensical glorification of violence that was ill-fitting and unnecessary. The panther dance's censorship reveals how black self-representation remains limited, how black subjectivity still cannot be comfortably expressed or received among popular audiences.[38] Jackson's initial denial of the panther dance's real semantic intent (only formally acknowledged over a decade later) provides evidence that he knew full well, as a powerful black American entertainer with a wish to express an equally powerful message, that there would be trouble. The negative response to and censorship of 'Black or White', as with the minstrel show, was driven by white, primarily male, hegemonic needs likely linked to racial fear, anxiety and guilt and this was at the expense of Jackson's own needs and expression. As Chin writes:

> Broadcasters, fearing the discomfort or perhaps anger of whites, reached into Jackson's video to make it acceptable to mainstream audiences. This deep concern for the comfort of whites is typical of race dynamics in the United

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[36] Clay, 'Working Day and Night', p. 7.

[37] 'Black or White' is estimated to have cost $1.5 million and it remains one of the most expensive, and most watched, music videos to date.

[38] Moreover, black self-representation is complex for it is difficult if not near impossible to present as different and separate from prevailing fallacies of blackness imposed by others 'outside': while Jackson in the panther dance *is* angry, at the same time he is theatricalizing minstrel-born ideas of black masculinity. The character he enacts is at once constructed (criminal, violent and unpredictable) and a 'true' expression of black subjectivity (his rage with racism) and this shows a further process whereby contemporary black expression is problematized. This is explored in Chapter 6.

> States, where the hard discussions about race cannot take place because some peoples' feelings (meaning the feelings of whites) may get hurt.[39]

In sum thus far, through the examination of the classic minstrel show – the portrayal of black caricatures through music and dance – one can see how Michael Jackson's panther postlude to 'Black or White' embodies this legacy. While it remains impossible to be sure Jackson is consciously evoking, a century and a half later, the deep memory of this past, it is hard to imagine he isn't: the shadowy features that link the panther dance to minstrelsy are as clear as day. Moreover, Jackson was a man known to have much respect for and knowledge of the performers and traditions that came before him. In its various guises, blackface minstrelsy held centre stage for the best part of an entire decade and it would not have just disappeared, least of all from the memories of black American entertainers. The legacy of minstrelsy has certainly not disappeared in the consciousness of Jackson's audience: as the reception to 'Black or White' illustrates, the conventions and ideas of minstrelsy literally define many peoples' reactions to and perceptions of Jackson and his work as they do understandings and treatment of black American men, and women, more generally.

Decoding the whiteface mask

After extensive plastic surgery to all aspects of his face and some twenty years of the effects of the skin disorder vitiligo and associated skin bleaching, Jackson, by the time of his release of 'Black or White', had worked hard to create his whiteface mask.[40] In the video's close-up frames we can see Jackson's physiognomy has been hardened to an almost skeletal degree. His nose is not just narrow but pinched in at both sides with a slight point and upturn added as well as prosthetic bridge, just visible if one knows to look. Beneath his pencilled eyebrows and wide eyes, his cheek bones are more pronounced, his chin chiselled, and a cleft added, and his mouth tightened. Beneath the brim of his fedora his Afro-cut has long been ironed away and given a wet look. His skin is not just pale but porcelain white.

In the form of critical sneers at worst, bafflement at best, the controversy and intrigue that surrounded Jackson's dramatic self-change was tireless, presenting it from the very beginning as an act of sell-out or crossover.[41] Geoff Brown's early

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[39] Chin, 'Michael Jackson's Panther Dance', p. 71.

[40] After decades of debate, investigations undertaken as part of the autopsy performed on Jackson confirmed he had been suffering from vitiligo, a dermatological disorder that drains the skin of pigment. The disease manifests itself in light patches on the skin and, as in the case of Jackson, these might occasionally progress to cover the entire body. Sufferers have traditionally been offered skin bleaching regimes as a method by which to reduce the variation of pigmentation.

[41] 'Crossover' is the term historically applied to musicians who successfully traversed the territory from one audience to another, especially from marginal to mainstream markets.

reading of Jackson's first physical alterations provides a typical example: 'Michael realized that the stereotyping of an artist as "black" carries the risk of commercial limitation, and he worked at those physical characteristics which could be modified or totally eradicated. Whether this tampering with Mother Nature would be of lasting value, remained to be seen.'[42] Jackson's facial modifications and changes to his skin in particular have since been routinely read as 'deracializing' acts symptomatic of the pursuit of whiteness in preference to his own black identity.[43]

But this alleged pursuit of 'white beauty' to establish crossover appeal just does not add up. By the time Jackson had begun to really chisel at his face he had produced *Thriller* with Quincy Jones, the best-selling album of all time, consolidated the genre of the music video into a legitimate art form and penetrated what was at the time of his first big hits ('Beat It' and 'Billie Jean') cable's racist programming – and indeed was dominating its airtime. But more tellingly, Jackson had also hitherto always spoken publicly from his position as a black American (and continued to do so throughout his career) and this positionality imbues his work. As Roberts acknowledges, in 'Black or White' Jackson typically 'speaks from a position of the disenfranchised rather than an elite, easy-to-promote-diversity perspective'.[44] Similarly, Jackson at no point disavows blackness in his dance (as illustrated earlier in this chapter) or in his vocal style (he 'scats' as impressively as Ella Fitzgerald), or in his musical make-up more generally (his amalgam of funk, disco, R&B and hip hop and 'white' rock).[45] Yet despite all this,

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For this reason it was applied to black artists in particular who established popularity among white audiences. Branded as the sound of 'Young America', Berry Gordy's Motown artists (of which a young Michael Jackson was one as lead singer in the Jackson Five) provide a collective example, as do all the well-known figures of rock 'n' roll (the perfect generic crossover). The term often denoted selling out or a 'dilution' of blackness as the musical product inevitably changed. Originally, there were also economic implications. More recently though, as popular music, audiences and artists more freely 'cross', the term has far less pertinence.

[42] Geoff Brown, *Michael Jackson: Body and Soul* (London: Virgin, 1984), p. 88.

[43] The hierarchical nature of skin tones (and so desirability of paler ones) may be traced back to slavery when slaves with lighter tones and/or ambiguous features – either 'fortuitous' or the result of miscegenation – were privileged with easier work. This colour-code was transported to the theatre where the so-called 'yaller' girls of blackface minstrelsy, with pale skin and small features, were considered attractive while black women, with much darker skin tone and grotesque physiognomies, were objects of distaste and the brunt of jokes.

[44] Roberts, 'Michael Jackson's Kingdom', p. 34. The black panther in the song's postlude similarly indicates Jackson's positionality as black American.

[45] For Roberts, Jackson, among others (including Prince, Lionel Richie, Diana Ross and Whitney Houston), was key in establishing 'pop' as a musical category, itself an amalgam of black and white music that was not assimilative but transracial in an industry that had traditionally segregated musical styles according to race. Roberts argues that to date the industry remains divided into racialized genres ('white rock, black hip hop, and,

Jackson has continued to be understood as a black male figure lacking in racial pride. Why?

As the minstrel show – the first sellable pop form – revealed, the hegemonic white entertainment business has been an arena traditionally assigned to white fantasies. Consequently, perhaps criticism of Jackson's self-change arose because we were startled and actually quite deeply disturbed by the peeling away of a black man's 'race' (and this could also point to another reason behind much of the criticism of 'Black or White'). The harsh negative attacks towards the aesthetic reconstructions of Jackson's face were perhaps because neither now nor at the time of 'Black or White' do we want to be confronted by the idea of a black man turning white. Surely for some this must arouse both white guilt about a deeply racist past and unease over the negative effects this has had on the black psyche to this day. But the evidence suggests that it is more about a racist present than a racist past, and about anxiety brought about by the inability to reconcile Jackson, who was neither black nor white.

In the early 1980s, a decade before 'Black or White', Michael Omi and Howard Winant wrote of the importance of 'race' in a way that still holds true today:

> Racial classification is a matter of *identity*. One of the first things we notice about people (along with their sex) is their race. We utilize race to provide clues about *who* a person is and to suggest how we should relate to him or her. This fact is made painfully obvious when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently categorize racially. Such an encounter becomes a source of discomfort and momentarily, a crisis of racial meaning. People in our culture need to clarify *who* people are in racial terms.[46]

More recently, and contemporaneously with 'Black or White', Homi Bhabha has explored this unease in discussion of what he refers to as 'the paranoid threat from the hybrid'. This threat is ultimately 'uncontainable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside. In the productivity of power, the boundaries of authority – its reality effects – are always besieged by "the other scene" of fixations and phantoms.'[47] According to Bhabha we are wholly entrenched in and heavily rely upon the idea of racial difference and definition. Indeed, today we live in an era in which nations and states still regulate race through bureaucratic processes (state-related paperwork that categorizes

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more-or-less, brown world music') capitalized on by industry officials and sometimes artists themselves. Roberts, 'Michael Jackson's Kingdom', p. 20. See also Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) and Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[46] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, 'By the Rivers of Babylon: Race in the United States', *Socialist Review*, 49 (1983): 31-65, at p. 49.

[47] Homi Bhabha, quoted in Middleton, *Voicing the Popular*, p. 89.

from birth an individual's race, colour, gender and national origin) and in which public discourse and media representations keep these categories sustained.[48] This notion of absolute racial difference, laid out, as we have seen, for the first time in mass popular culture by the minstrel show, was undercut by Jackson. In 'Black or White', through various surgical, aesthetic and performative options, Jackson effaces a social structure of non-racial Self versus racialized Other that we have traditionally used, and continue to use, to organize and understand ourselves. We were made to feel uncomfortable, unsettled and we chose to block it out: 'It's official: Jacko was Wacko.'

But this conclusion that 'Jacko was Wacko', along with the popular presumption that he was seeking out an identity in favour to his own, denies what could have represented a much more radical attempt at racial dissolution more broadly. Perhaps a common mistake in the reading of Jackson's facial change – his whiteface mask – lay in the interpretation of its pallor; for while to be white is to be Caucasian, so is it to be in possession of no colour, to be race-less (the marked or labelled – 'black' – as the different Other; the unmarked or unlabelled – 'white' – as the normative Self).[49] To read Jackson's self-transformations as episodes in the relentless pursuit of whiteness, as in Caucasian, is surely to miss the point, not only because he never actually disavowed his blackness culturally – its evidence being in his music, dance and rhetoric – but also because he was not white but porcelain, his nose not just narrow but partly built from a prosthetic so that neither feature was a simulation or 'true' reproduction of whiteness at all. These two facts suggest that the aim with his face seemed rather not to flee blackness in search of whiteness but to flee *race* as biological fact, symbolized by the recognizable collection of physical characteristics. This is what Manning Marable refers to as 'racial identity', determined by skin colour and deliberately imposed on blacks by others, and which he separates from 'Black cultural identity', created by blacks themselves and forged through shared history, social experience and cultural forms. Blackness is for Marable, as it was for Jackson, not skin colour but 'music, dance, and artistic sensibility [and the] quest for human dignity'.[50]

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[48] Dawn-Elissa Fischer, 'Wannabe Startin' Somethin': Michael Jackson's Critical Race Representation', *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 23/1 (2011): 96-107, at p. 96.

[49] One should exercise with caution, however, the understanding of whiteness as a colourless void or absent identity for this can work to further naturalize racism and power. Indeed, there is a rising body of work investigating whiteness more critically.

[50] Manning Marable, 'Race, Identity, and Political Culture', in Gina Dent (ed.), *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), pp. 292-302, at pp. 295-6 and 302. Marable's 'racial identity' is the stuff of classic minstrelsy and Du Bois's veil, which Jackson showed he understood in the original photograph intended for the cover of his 1987 album *Bad*. The photograph, which was rejected by advisors at the last minute for being too 'feminine', is a close-up shot of Jackson's made-up and already slightly altered face superimposed with black floral lace. The lace, or veil, does not merely hang before Jackson's face (though it does extend to all margins of the image) but rather clings to it. While the photograph

As Steve Perry avers, Jackson's face lay claim to a vision, 'to become a new class of being altogether: free, mobile, empowered, colourblind – the "new breed"'.[51] This radical desire, this 'new breed' is also articulated by Jean Baudrillard in his reflections on Jackson's self-change written a year before the release of 'Black or White'. For Baudrillard, Jackson's carefully crafted whiteface mask symbolized 'the race to end all races' making him even better equipped than Christ 'to reign over the world and reconcile its contradictions [to] … deliver us from race and sex'.[52] Jackson's mask should not have been understood as a marker of sell-out and negative black self-image but, through its erosion of *race*, as evidence of ambition and revolution: the reconfiguration of not his face but of a less than perfect world. Jackson nullified not blackness but blackness as biological fact and therefore by default whiteness and race in a cultural context that since the days of the classic minstrel show has used in fundamental ways a racist binarism of Self and Other, white and black, based on absolute racial difference. Jackson took the blackface mask and turned it inside out.

With this in mind, perhaps it is no accident that the moment at which most destruction takes place in 'Black or White' is not when Jackson throws a trashcan or wields a crowbar, but when he roars skywards, tearing away his wet shirt like an unwanted layer of skin to reveal his bare, wholly whitened torso (see Figure 2.8). Behind this alarming show (which is repeated in a sequence of slightly varied takes) a huge explosion erupts as the 'Royal Arms Hotel' sign comes crashing to the ground amid a fire hydrant's spray, a shower of sparks and a haze of dry ice. While this collapse would seem to be caused by the fire hydrant's explosion of water coming into contact with the electric hotel sign, it could be read as being caused by the disclosure of the extent to which Jackson's skin has been blanched (prior to this he had never shown so much flesh): the tearing away of his shirt and the destruction of the hotel front become a ripping at the seams of race and the social structure it underpins. Like an aesthetic surface upon which Jackson wrote his vision, Jackson's body and its call for brotherhood visualizes the message of 'Black or White'. While the song and video vocalize and visualize racial coexistence and the powerful solitary dance reminds us how far we still have to go, Jackson denies absolute racial difference through surgical choices in his face. Jackson is empowered, the locus of control in minstrelsy has shifted and he can dance atop the Statue of Liberty, for he has freed himself from the constraints of an over-determined social structure of Self and Other, white and

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is striking it is also uncomfortable and seems to allude to suffocation from an external force. For a reproduction of this image, see Michael Jackson, *Dancing the Dream* (London: Random House, 2009), p. 28.

[51] Steve Perry, 'Ain't No Mountain High Enough: The Politics of Crossover', in Simon Frith (ed.), *Facing the Music: Essays on Rock, Pop and Culture* (London: Mandarin, 1990), pp. 51-87, at p. 84.

[52] Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 21-2.

black, traditionally created to meet others' needs. Jackson, in his own mind at least, had freed himself from the blackface mask.

Figure 2.8 Jackson reveals his white torso, from 'Black or White'

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Chapter 3
The Continuum of Blackface Minstrelsy

> Minstrelsy also instigated several new forms, such as tap dance and the musical theatre … And it was present at the creation of Vesuvian changes in film (*The Jazz Singer*), and jazz … What's more, such twists on pop music as rock 'n' roll and, most recently of all, rap and hiphop are inconceivable without the minstrel paradigm.[1]

The demise of the classic minstrel show

The classic minstrel show remained the dominant form of American popular culture from the rise of Dan Emmett's Virginia Minstrels in the early 1840s through to the 1870s. Following the abolition of slavery in America, however, the minstrel show had begun to change in that its images of plantation life had become heavily sentimentalized in a style songwriter Stephen Foster had started popularizing before the Civil War. In this new context and as blacks in the real world were disenfranchised, left in limbo and ostracized by the country they had helped build, the antebellum slave stage-type continued but served more as a romanticized symbol of stability and order. Although such grotesque antebellum images as the slave fell out of vogue, minstrelsy continued to attack the idea of black equality: blacks were relegated to the rural South and in fact the pseudo-slavery tenant-farmer system, which saw the continuation of black subordinate existence, was foreseen on the minstrel stage.

It was during these postbellum years in minstrelsy's development when black performers finally emerged in white-controlled troupes and found success for what was believed to be their 'authenticity'. Indeed, as white actors moved away from the harsh antebellum caricatures, black entertainers remained limited by them and, in fact, blacks' entry into minstrelsy re-energized their popularity: black performers had no choice but to apply the grotesque mask and play the characters their forebears had evolved. Although by the mid-1870s major all-black troupes such as the Georgia Minstrels were finally established, by this time they were part of a much larger, more plural entertainment scene than had hitherto been the case, competing with a variety of other travelling theatricals such as freak shows, Wild West shows, medicine shows and carnivals. In the dominant realm of white

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[1] W.T. Lhamon Jr, 'Ebery Time I Wheel About I Jump Jim Crow: Cycles of Minstrel Transgression from Cool White to Vanilla Ice', in Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch and Brooks McNamara (eds), *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings of Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), pp. 275-84, at p. 276.

entertainment, meanwhile, the minstrel show had developed into a more loosely organized variety show. This included revues, imported operetta, vaudeville acts, burlesques and farces which, despite displaying minstrel roots, were no longer defined by them. Controlled by heavily capitalized companies, such shows were refined and lavish with high production values and were purged of most racial subjects and material. With this, the use of the literal mask – now socially less acceptable – had become more a stage convention contained in nostalgic 'specialities'. The reign of the classic minstrel show had drawn to a close.

The continuum of blackface minstrelsy

Although the blackface mask withdrew from centre stage it continued to appear, from the 'blacked up' comic performers of the coon song and cakewalk crazes of the 1890s through to the most important cinematic landmark events at the turn of the century: both the first multi-reel film, *Birth of the Nation* (1915), and the first sound movie, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), had as their narratives whites performing in blackface (see Figure 3.1). Having made his name in *The Jazz Singer*, the Jewish immigrant Al Jolson appeared under the mask in every one of his subsequent films: *The Singing Fool* (1928), *Mammy* and *Big Boy* (1930), *Wonder Bar* (1933) and *The Singing Kid* (1936). Jolson had a long career that was literally defined by the conventions of minstrelsy.

Figure 3.1 Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer*

Although by the late 1930s these 'blacked up' images associated with cinema and Jolson (including the conventional scene of the mask's application) had become less easy to consume and Jolson's popularity had declined, for some decades after audiences continued to see white film actors 'black up'. This was in the Hollywood movie musical – the genre that had developed out of the Jolson films and that was subsequently dominated by producers Metro Goldwyn Mayer (MGM). In its biopic of Stephen Foster, for example, *Swanee River* (1939) featured 'blacked up' actors and likewise the story of Dan Emmett, *Dixie* (1943), included blackface numbers. Hollywood's biggest stars of its 'golden years' – including Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney, Betty Grable and Bing Crosby – all 'blacked up' in blackface specials or novelty numbers at some stage in their careers. Furthermore, as Arthur Knight acknowledges in his approach to the racial underside of the movie musical, these scenes worked to establish whites themselves as specifically white and modern – a process at the heart of classic blackface minstrelsy: the 'blacked up' appearances of Grable, Garland and Rooney worked to 'claim whiteness as a clear and stable category and to marginalize blacks'.[2] With the onset of the Second World War and the black militancy and mass protests that came with it, along with the emergence of the Civil Rights movement, the use of the blackface mask in the movies became increasingly uneasy. By around 1950 the mask in film had been made simply too self-conscious and it finally withdrew.

The blackface mask was still seen in relic forms into the 1970s, as in *The Black and White Minstrel Show* on British TV, but has since disappeared from view. However, the continuum of its tradition has remained pervasive in popular theatre and music. In fact, minstrelsy's various conventions, gestures, tropes and images (relating to black masculinity in particular) still hold good today. As part of this, and as this chapter will go on to explore, blackface minstrelsy lives on in the apparently less politically charged white appropriation of black cultural idioms not least in popular music and video (the latter, in many ways, today's manifestation of the Hollywood movie musical; the movie musical itself the evolution of theatrical minstrelsy). Admittedly, this musical and gestural stream is part of a wide spectrum of other processes relating to borrowing and exchange far less political than minstrelsy and in an era in which blackness is now far more thoroughly assimilated. However, at moments when this white appropriation has occurred black marginalization and limitation have been typically involved. This is what makes it the stuff of blackface minstrelsy.

As was the case with the first white versions of blackface performance, white appropriations of black cultural forms since this time have routinely denied blacks themselves both the largest financial rewards available and ownership of and credit for their widest disseminations. What's more, and also true to the minstrel tradition, these instances have repeatedly allowed the space for whites to play

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[2] Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 84-5. For the definition of whiteness through blackness in the classic minstrel show, see Chapter 2, Part I.

with whiteness (and blackness) while black artists are denied the same luxury. Instead, black entertainers have all too often been assigned, or entangled, in those images of black masculinity traditionally constructed by and for whites on the minstrel stage. These various elements that represent the continuum of minstrelsy are illustrated here through three examples: the Hollywood movie musical, rock 'n' roll and hip hop.

The Hollywood movie musical

Despite being controlled, fronted and assumed to be consumed universally by whites, the Hollywood movie musical nevertheless drew on black cultural idioms and was inspired by black performers, and nowhere more profoundly than in its dance. Although derived from an amalgam of styles including European traditions such as ballroom and ballet (evident in its *port de bras*, certain turns and leaps and a fondness for close-couple partnering), the movie musical's dance also drew from a whole variety of vernacular styles rooted in black dancing traditions. These included tap (and its various related forms such as chorus line, legomania, eccentric and rhythm), the knee-bumping Charleston and the syncopated two-step of Lindy Hop. In addition to traditional genres, and in stark contrast to the erect spines, straight legs and curved arms of the European-American styles, the dance of the Hollywood musical also appropriated countless black gestures and movements such as twists, spins and struts, wide-knee and bent-knee steps and angulated postures. Traditional black aesthetics and attitudes were also integral: the centrality of rhythm (its articulation or visualization as opposed to its gliding or smoothing over), a fondness for freeform and spontaneity (abrupt transitions, stops and 'surprise' moves), the individualization or manipulation of steps (such as the breakaways in Lindy Hop and rhythm tap) and the combination of nonchalance with precision (non-choreography versus conventional steps).[3]

The high-energy comic dance numbers of the Hollywood musical drew directly from the black acts that could be found on Broadway. Among these were Buck and Bubbles, an account of whom offers a wonderful description of the style that became synonymous with the movie musical's comic numbers:

> Starting with a lazy Charleston, [Buck] adds a slide and a Fall Off the Log, ending with a two-bar break in which he places one large shoe on top of the

[3] Ironically, while such 'natural' qualities were revered in the movie musical they had traditionally been among those ridiculed by white entertainers in their portrayals of black people as the 'natural' possessors of rhythm and bodily impulses. In contrast to traditional minstrelsy, by the time of the MGM musical it is not a 'simple' black character but Fred Astaire, one of Hollywood's biggest stars, who tells Ginger Rogers in *Top Hat* (1935) how every once in awhile he suddenly 'finds himself dancing' and who, in *Finian's Rainbow* (1968), tells Petula Clark he 'can't stop dancing'.

> other and falls on his face. Yawning, he picks himself up and returns to the piano, where he plays a few self-congratulatory chords, confident that he has outdone Bubbles.[4]

Many Hollywood stars were known to go and watch black dancers perform in Harlem cabarets and nightclub revues, such as those at the famous Cotton Club, where veritable black talent was nurtured and celebrated.

Despite the variety of the film musical's choreography, it was tap (or 'hoofing') that became its most characteristic feature, largely because of its sonic component, which could at once showcase and be showcased by the new synchronized sound technology.[5] For all tap's diverse roots – from Lancashire clog dancing to the Irish jig – its first practitioners were black, as Jacqui Malone and W.T. Lhamon have argued persuasively. 'Every tap dancer after Juba [the black antebellum minstrel]', Malone writes, 'is in some sense a student of the William Henry Lane School.'[6] Early tap had featured in minstrelsy in the form of heel solos, the Juba dance (for which pennies were screwed onto the underside of dancers' shoes) and in the likes of John Diamond's heel–toe genius. Among the most successful postbellum black minstrels, Bert Williams and George Walker, along with Buck and Bubbles, were also influential and contributed to the development of the modern version of tap dance with which we are familiar today. Tap featured in some form or another in just about every production of the movie musical's golden years, occupying a central if not defining role. With regard to the iconic *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) Carol Clover writes:

> The showstopping musical numbers, the ones that stick with us, are those in which [Gene] Kelly and [Donald] O'Connor, singly or together, burst into tap-based dance – above all, Cosmo [O'Connor]'s solo 'Make 'Em Laugh' (a gymnastic tour de force of pratfalls, one-legged hopping, body-spinning on the floor, running up walls and backflipping down, and so on), the Cosmo/

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[4] Jean and Marshall Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), p. 214.

[5] In the 1930s, when synchronized sound was still relatively new, tap was the perfect dance form, for it was not just about movement but also about sound, about the production of complex rhythms and timbres. This visual-aural conflation connected tap to black culture and most specifically the African ring shout tradition in which bodily movement and sound were closely linked. This conflation has threaded its way through much black American artistic expression since Juba characteristically used his body as a musical instrument. Interestingly, a large number of top jazz drummers of the Hollywood musical era could tap, including Philly Joe Jones, Buddy Rich, Jo Jones, Big Sid Catlett, Eddie Locke and Cozy Cole. See Jacqui Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African-American Dance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 95.

[6] Ibid., p. 54. William Henry Lane was Juba's birth name. For Lhamon, the first practitioners of tap were slaves who danced to white spectators for eels on a raised board at New York's Catherine Market in the 1830s. Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 9.

> Don [O'Connor/Kelly] duet 'Moses' (which turns an elocution lesson into a 'spontaneous, anarchic dance routine'), and, of course, the 'Singin' in the Rain' sequence itself, which is to the genre of the musical what the shower sequence of *Psycho* is to the genre of horror.[7]

Except in its few all-black productions, which found recognition among black audiences, the MGM-style musical was characterized by a dearth of black performers, especially in its 'greats'.[8] Black performers were largely absent, in subordinate mute roles or contained in novelty numbers, often as entertainers, designed for easy removal (especially for showings in the South where audiences were most hostile to black actors). This sort of marginalization was routine for acts such as the extraordinarily talented Nicholas Brothers and even Lena Horne, one of the few black entertainers to find major mainstream success. The supportive and uncredited appearance of LeRoy Daniels in his dance with Fred Astaire in *The Band Wagon* (1953) provides the perfect example of the black sidelining that was standard practice.[9] Of note, this was the only scene in Astaire's filmic carer in which he danced with a black performer.

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[7] Clover, 'Dancin' in the Rain', p. 726. Running up walls and back-flipping back down was a favourite trick in the comic dance sequences of the Nicholas Brothers and was later executed by Astaire in *Royal Wedding* (1951) (although in the latter the move is as much the product of technological advance as it is Astaire's ability as a dancer). The 'family' in Michael Jackson's short-film *Ghosts* (1997) performs the same move (see Chapter 4).

[8] Alongside the creation of the Hollywood 'greats' was the production of an unprecedented and unparalleled string of eight all-black or predominantly all-black cast musicals, which although they found recognition among black audiences at the time have remained comparatively obscure: *Hearts in Dixie* and *Hallelujah!* (1929), *The Green Pastures* (1936), *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* (1943), *Carmen Jones* (1954), *St Louis Blues* (1958) and *Porgy and Bess* (1959). This black body of work has been noted to be the most unusual product of classic Hollywood. Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical*, p. 124.

[9] Studied insightfully by Jodi Brooks, this is the penny arcade scene in which Astaire, playing the 'washed out' hoofer Tony Hunter, falls over a bootblack, LeRoy Daniels. Together they dance to the number 'Shine on my Shoes', sung by Astaire. The duo tap a routine that begins with Daniels getting to work on Astaire's shoes and, as Brooks details, in many ways leading the dance by doing this. As the number develops, however, the focus shifts from Daniels to Astaire as the latter jumps up from his seat to adopt and adapt the bootblack's steps and syncopation into an energetic solo. For this, Daniels takes on the role of spectator and does not return until the scene's close; down on one knee, arms out-stretched, Jolson-style. Daniels is mute and subordinate yet excels in creative energy (so much so that it is contagious, Astaire 'catching' it to create his own virtuosic dance). Daniels is contained, not appearing anywhere else in the movie (although the tune with which he is associated does) and he was, typically, uncredited. See Jodi Brooks, 'Ghosting the Machine: The Sounds of Tap and the Sounds of Film', *Screen*, 44/4 (2003): 355-78, at pp. 368-9.

Meanwhile, black talent was heavily exploited backstage in the production of Hollywood's musicals. This included dance trainers such as Herbie Harper and Buddy Bradley, and choreographers such as Willie Covan – MGM's head dance instructor during the 1930s. Bradley, whose dance style was inspired by the various rhythmic patterns of improvised jazz solos and blended tap and movements from the black vernacular, had played a crucial role on Broadway during the 1920s and 1930s. Bradley privately coached most of Hollywood's biggest stars, Astaire among them, but never directed the dance of film musicals and despite his influential role remained relatively obscure, not once receiving public recognition for his work.[10] In show business, Bradley often expressed a sense of ostracism: 'I never saw half the shows my stuff appeared in … I wasn't invited, and besides I was too busy teaching.'[11]

Although in private the famous white entertainers of Hollywood recognized black dancers as inspirational, their public recognition of this remained rare if not entirely absent: Kelly, for example, despite being an outspoken left-liberal and thereby progressive on matters of race, failed to fully credit relations with the black dancers and traditions from which he drew. In contrast, he was remarkably sincere about the influence Astaire had had on him as a youngster: 'I sat there day in day out watching that movie [*Flying Down to Rio* starring Astaire]. I must have seen the picture thirty or forty times … This led me to study dancing.'[12] The only comment made by Astaire on the origins of his dance in his autobiography, and which closes the account of his life, is one of complete denial of black cultural influence:

> When you come to the evolution of the dance, its history and philosophy, I know as much about that as I do about how a television tube produces a picture – which is absolutely nothing. I don't know how it all started and I don't want to know … I just dance.[13]

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[10] It ought to be noted here that during the 1930s, as indeed now, it was generally the performer not the choreographer who got the credit for a routine. This was simply standard practice, not entirely a racial one.

[11] Buddy Bradley, quoted in Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, p. 162.

[12] Gene Kelly, quoted in Peter Wollen, *Singin' in the Rain* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), p. 60.

[13] Fred Astaire, quoted in Clover, 'Dancin' in the Rain', p. 741, n. 38. In this wider trend of non-credit by whites of black cultural influence we have the repetition of the narrative of world economics to which Paul Gilroy has paid much attention. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy's key economic argument is the crucial role played by blacks: the main reason why plantations were so hugely profitable and able to bolster the world economy was because of their captive labour. Yet despite this, as Gilroy goes on, the abolishment of slavery left blacks disenfranchised and ostracized by the country they had been central in building. The arduous work of slaves went unacknowledged as America reaped its economic gains. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993). Likewise, the black input

Rock 'n' roll

In the arena of popular music, the case of rock 'n' roll provides an example of the continuum of blackface minstrelsy in the form of white appropriation of black cultural language. Indeed, nothing energized white popular music in the 1950s more than the black styles of rhythm and blues which, emanating from small, independent record labels, first caught the imaginations of white youths and the white working classes. Meanwhile, the mainstream music industry – the market of which were the white middle classes – was committed to the big-band crooner style and prevented, in its power and pervasiveness, the commercial growth and marketing of anything else, including rhythm and blues. However, when the music of artists such as Little Richard and Chuck Berry really took off (promising the first black penetration of the white hegemonic mainstream), things began to change: the four major labels, in an attempt to regain control, began to issue cover versions of the rhythm and blues they had initially rendered invisible. The big labels began producing white pop artists, such as Tommy Sands, Tab Hunter and Pat Boone, who covered rhythm and blues and added in Tin Pan Alley characteristics to make the music more 'palatable'. Grabbing the attention of the white middle classes, these cover versions and their artists became widely popular and saw much greater exposure than had the black originals and their artists, limited on independent labels.

As white country singer Bill Haley moved into the business of covering and then writing rhythm and blues hits, first with The Saddlemen, later with The Comets, to culminate in 'Crazy Man Crazy' (1953), Sam Phillips of Sun Records was witnessing this shift. Perhaps the Dan Emmett of his time, Phillips recognized: 'If I could find a white man who had a Negro sound and a Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.'[14] In 1954, with country singer Elvis Presley, Phillips did just that. For while Presley's voice displayed white country characteristics (including the yodel and a light, melodic quality suggestive of the traditional ballad style) he also sounded black through the inclusion of slurs and melismata, the 'blues shouter' and a wide repertoire of percussive effects deriving from black vocal traditions. In fact, Presley sounded so black that his early listeners thought he

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that went largely uncredited at the time of production of musicals in Hollywood is also evident in its historiography: Jane Feuer's *The Hollywood Musical* – among the genre's key pieces of literature – almost completely neglects the influence of black vernacular dance styles, only referencing them through vague terms such as 'American folk stance and gesture'. Instead, Feuer foregrounds ballet, mime-ballet and modern dance, thereby excluding from history the choreography's real originators. And this is typical: while the influence of black music and dance in the film musical has to some extent been credited in dance theory and history, in film debates it remains largely overlooked. This is an elision Brooks acknowledges in her study of the sounds of tap in film. Brooks, 'Ghosting the Machine', p. 369. See Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (London: Macmillan, 1993).

[14] Jon Garelick, 'Sam Phillips – Rock's Visionary', at http://www.sunrecordscompany.com/Sam_Phillips.html [accessed 20 June 2012].

was such and white radio stations were reluctant to play his records.[15] Together at Sun Records, Phillips and Presley – later joined by Carl Perkins – developed rockabilly: the southern white country version of the twelve bar boogie blues (the three-line twelve bar blues structure characteristic of much rhythm and blues).

The massive commercial potential for white rhythm and blues was realized by Presley's first hit with RCA Victor, 'Heartbreak Hotel' (1956), for which he glossed rhythm and blues with country and a rockabilly beat. Presley went on to become the first and most commercially successful artist to make a black sound really work as pop in the hegemonic mainstream. Phillips meanwhile soon dropped black artists (he had previously worked with B.B. King and Howlin' Wolf) in favour of white ones such as Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis and Roy Orbison. By this time it was official, Presley was 'The King of Rock 'n' Roll' and this caused resentment among many southern blues musicians who, limited on independent labels, considered Presley to be beating them at their own game.[16] As blackface minstrelsy by the 1840s had been consolidated into a professional form controlled by whites, rhythm and blues, with the rise of Presley and its transformation into rock 'n' roll, similarly witnessed black marginalization with white corporate takeover. However, unlike antebellum minstrelsy – in which black entertainers remained almost entirely absent – black artists did break through. Among them were Fats Domino and Little Richard, with a New Orleans dance blues version of rock 'n' roll, and Chuck Berry, with his rocking Chicago blues style. Berry's success, however, was undoubtedly facilitated by a voice that, in its tone and enunciation, could pass as white.

Rock 'n' roll represented a new episode in the continuum of blackface minstrelsy not only in its white appropriation and commercial takeover of black music, but also in its images of black masculinity: rock 'n' roll saw the theatricalization of the very same stage-types of blackness, and black masculinity in particular, cultivated by white men for the traditional minstrel show. This historic imagery was front and centre and nowhere more so than in Presley's over-sexed stage persona.[17] Through the appropriation and exaggeration of the blues model of freer male behaviour, Presley projected an image of hypersexual masculinity: the foot-spread stance, the blatant thrusts, the half-closed eyes and parted lips and the reduction to a body part by his sobriquet 'The Pelvis' (brought about by his gyrations from behind the phallic guitar, formerly the banjo among minstrels). For these heavily sexualized projections that represented a very real threat to white cultural values, Presley was feared among his detractors. Presley's songs, with their sexual subject matter,

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[15] Similarly, nineteenth-century audiences were fooled into believing the most talented minstrels were black and for this reason it became commonplace for posters and playbills to illustrate performers both in and out of costume.

[16] Marcus Greil, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music* (London: Omnibus Press, 1977), p. 143.

[17] Although this sexual display had been familiar to the minstrel show it was hitherto foreign to the white middle- and upper-class audiences of the Tin Pan Alley era.

worked only to compound this: the blatancy of 'Blue Suede Shoes' for example and the unmistakable undertones to 'I want you, I need you, I love you'.[18]

Little Richard, in his frenetic, at times almost hysterical performances, very clearly reflected minstrel imagery. This was perhaps nowhere more evident than in his vocal style – his screeching falsetto, vocal swoops and shouts. Little Richard's was a savage body and many young white audiences projected onto it, as they did Presley's (as well as the earliest blackface minstrels'), a whole host of anxieties and desires otherwise suppressed. In discussion of Little Richard's excitable stage antics, Charlie Gillett concedes: 'With Little Richard, the rock 'n' roll audience got the aggressive extrovert to enact their wilder fantasies.'[19]

A decade later, when rock 'n' roll had almost disappeared from American pop music, across the Atlantic, white, middle-class men – The Rolling Stones and The Beatles – helped make black music and gesture apparently more palatable among middle-class audiences who had originally vilified it. Especially in their early records, The Beatles featured Chuck Berry-like guitar licks and Little Richard falsettos.[20] Their name taken from the Muddy Waters song, The Rolling Stones covered and remade numerous rock 'n' roll hits, among them Chuck Berry's 'Come On' and 'You Can't Catch Me', Irma Thomas's 'Time is on My Side' and Sam Cooke's 'Little Red Roster'. The Rolling Stones brought to the forefront their lineage from the genre, for the various styles of rock 'n' roll provided the basis for the music of all major white artists of the 1960s. As Presley and Little Richard had re-projected images of classic minstrelsy before them, so did The Stones' front man, Mick Jagger. With his exaggerated, gutsy vocal style and, as Richard Middleton has described them, 'lips that rendered him born into blackface', Jagger

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[18] Robert Fink reads Presley from a rather more nuanced angle however (although one that may still be viewed through the lens of blackface minstrelsy), by the documentation of a series of live and recorded versions of 'Hound Dog' (1956). Fink argues that Presley's rebellion, and the subsequent counter-culture he helped formulate, was in fact the result of the misreading of what was meant as a comic caricature of what he took to be typical black gestures. As Fink details, having seen the song performed in a Las Vegas lounge as comedy burlesque, Presley began including the number in his shows, intended as comic relief. But the parody was missed and Presley's comic travesty of black sexuality was instead read as obscene, causing moral panic to break out. Angered by his condemnation Presley went on to rebel in this exaggerated way as a protesting anti-stance against his critics. This started with the recording of 'Hound Dog', which Presley and his band transformed into 'a menacing, rough-trade version … quite different from the one they had been performing on stage'. Robert Fink, 'Elvis Everywhere: Musicology and Popular Music Studies at the Twilight of the Canon', *American Music*, 16/2 (1998): 135-79, at p. 169.

[19] Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll* (London: Souvenir Press, 1996), p. 26. For the various white desires that were satisfied over the body of the black man in traditional minstrelsy, see Chapter 2, Part I.

[20] George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press), pp. 127-8.

in his stud-hustler image and dance style reflected an image of black masculinity born from minstrelsy.[21]

Hip hop

While the 1970s had witnessed a deep economic depression with rising oil prices, the 1980s saw a great economic expansion in the USA, engineered by Ronald Reagan. The counterpart of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the period 1982-89 witnessed an economic boom: a consistent burst of economic activity including a huge rise in employment and significant wealth creation (some $30 trillion worth of goods and services).[22] However, as certain strata of society benefited in a big way – mainly the white upper classes – the poor got poorer. By the late 1980s the poverty rate had risen and a social gulf had widened to cause ghettoization coded to a large extent by race. Imprisoned within inner cities (and literally, with increasing cases of crime and incarceration), poor blacks saw not economic improvement but the complete reverse with many living in squalid conditions.

For black urban youths facing poor economic and social prospects, the popular music forms of the day offered little. Disco had become a heavily commercialized crossover from soul (which had worked to displace black R&B artists) while Motown had suffered a similar fate, marked by its corporate takeover and move from Detroit. Much of the soul that was still around was being put out by a collection of Philadelphia-based companies producing a rather glossy, sentimental version with which black urban youths did not identify. It was in this context that hip hop became an important cultural movement.

Hip hop first rose out of the South Bronx, New York where, in 1973, the DJ Afrika Bambaataa, an ex-gang member interested in black cultural traditions and the philosophies of Black Nationalist leaders such as Malcolm X, founded the school-based Youth Organization. This brought young blacks together through the interest in and development of street arts. These youngsters' break-dancing, 'locking' and 'popping', DJing, rapping and graffiti art prepared the way for what would become widely recognized as the stuff of hip hop. With its distinct collection of slang, dress code, art, gestures and sounds, hip hop provided a form of expression that resonated among black urban youths. Central to hip hop was rap and through its coarse language it voiced strong anti-establishment sentiments.

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[21] Middleton, *Voicing the Popular*, p. 87. Lhamon details how some of Jagger's most characteristic moves were the black steps that had featured on the minstrel stage, including what he terms the 'market step' (the heel–toe rock) and 'wheel step' (the stylization of Jim Crow's dance) – 'so common, and so self-dramatizing in Atlantic vernacular dance', Lhamon writes, 'that it hasn't been renamed since "Jump Jim Crow": "wheel about and turn about and do jis so"'. Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 222.

[22] Martin Anderson, 'The Reagan Boom – Greatest Ever', at http://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/17/opinion/the-reagan-boom-greatest-ever.html [accessed 29 May 2012].

Hip hop fiercely critiqued all other popular musical styles that through their white cooptation and campness (many disco DJs by this time were white and gay) had sidelined black male heterosexuality. Consequently, rap voiced sentiments of misogyny and homophobia. As Houston Baker explains:

> [The] resentment of disco culture and a reassertion of black manhood rights (rites) – no matter who populated the discotheques – was a natural thing. And what the early hip hoppers saw was that the task for the break between general 'popular' and being 'black by popular demand' had to be occupied.[23]

Kool DJ Herc (Clive Campbell) and Grandmaster Flash (Joseph Saddler) dominated hip hop's music in its formative years as they explored new formulae by remixing pre-recorded sound, sampling, cutting and 'scratching'. Beneath this, with the assistance of a beat box, a pre-recorded rhythm track was added and above it, improvised rhymes – what would become standard rap. Rap evolved from a number of black musical traditions: 'patting juba' (the creative, spontaneous and rhythmic use of language), toasting rites (a blend of rap and reggae), R&B (reciting lyrics to a bare rhythm track) and well-established forms of wordplay, from jazz scat (the use of syllabic, vocal sounds) to the parodic rhetoric of minstrel songs and 'playing the dozens' (the vocal exchange of improvisatory insults between two men). James Brown, 'Godfather of Soul', was an inspirational figure as were 'Master of Funk' George Clinton and Teddy Riley, a key figure in the development of New Jack Swing (the fusion of rap and R&B). With its anti-establishment stance and Black Nationalism, rap and the language of hip hop more generally spoke to the gangs and youths of poor black neighbourhoods who could effectively express themselves and voice their concerns through it.

In its development, the music of hip hop became increasingly political: the Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five album *The Message* (1982) is an example of this, its themes the harsh realities of life in the nation's slums, the protest against them and the call for black urban unification as the mode for survival. In addition, gangsta rap emerged – yet more political and explicit – led by Niggaz With Attitude (NWA) (Dr Dre, Eazy-E, DJ Yella and MC Ren), Ice Cube (O'Shea Jackson, who had left NWA in its early days) and Snoop Dog (Calvin Broadus). More crudely than ever, gangsta rap foregrounded ghetto tropes of violence, drugs, sex, gangs and warfare. The Native Tongues wing of rap (artists such as Queen Latifa, A Tribe Called Quest and De La Soul) by the late 1980s similarly concerned itself with black cultural politics (though less aggressively than gangsta rap), as did the commercial, more melodic and upbeat version of rap. This was put out most famously by Run-DMC (Joseph Simons, Darryl McDaniels and Jason Mizell) with their rock/rap hybrid, Salt 'n' Pepa (Cheryl James and Sandra Denton) and MC Hammer (Stanley Kirk Burrell) and it began to successfully penetrate the

[23] Houston Baker, 'Hybridity, the Rap Race and Pedagogy for the 1990s', *Black Music Research Journal*, 11/2 (1991): 217-28, at p. 218.

white mainstream market. Run-DMC were considered the first celebrities of rap after performing on American Bandstand and MTV (two institutions that had previously shunned the genre). MC Hammer became rap's first superstar.

In repetition of the trajectory of rhythm and blues, it proved only a matter of time before the white-led media control of hip hop was underway and rap was taken to the recording studios of the pop world by white artists. In the starkest contrast imaginable from its days as a voice of the underclass, hip hop evolved into a commodified mainstream American style, and not just a musical one. As senior editor of *Spin* magazine Charles Aaron observed in 1998: 'Fashion designers such as Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger court hip-hop's imprimatur and from Nike to Sprite, sampling and selling black cool to white consumers is the get rich quick scheme of the decade.'[24] While numerous black ghetto artists were exploited or dropped (what Elizabeth A. Wheeler describes as 'the culture industry's worst sin against hip hop') white rappers enjoyed unparalleled success.[25] Among them were the Beastie Boys (Michael Diamond, Adam Horovitz, Adam Yauch and André Brown, later replaced by Wendell Fite), whose debut album *Licensed to Ill* of 1986 was a multi-million dollar best-seller. Of particular significance was Vanilla Ice (Robert Van Winkle), a white youth, not of the 'hood' – raised poor and white in a black Miami ghetto as he claimed – but reared in the middle-class suburbs of Dallas, Texas: the ghetto had become a source of fabricated white authenticity. By appropriating Run-DMC's rock/rap hybrid and Hammer's rap/dance orientation, Vanilla Ice became the most commercially successful rap artist of his time. As well as his fabricated autobiography, Vanilla Ice was also disingenuous over issues of credit, as the white Hollywood actors before him had been. While Vanilla Ice took almost full credit for his mega hit 'Ice, Ice Baby' he paid no royalties to Mario Johnson, the black producer who had composed the single, along with other tracks from the fifteen-times platinum album *To the Extreme* (1990). Moreover, Vanilla Ice strongly denied the hook of 'Ice, Ice Baby' had been lifted from the signature chant of the national black fraternity Alpha Phi Alpha, of whom he claimed he had never even heard, though the evidence suggested otherwise.

Following Vanilla Ice, other white MCs surfaced and in 1999 controversial white rapper Eminem (Marshall Mathers) emerged. Eminem's debut album *The Slim Shady LP* (1999) won Grammy Award for best rap album and his following album, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, reportedly became the fastest selling hip hop album ever. By 2008 fans of the Quincy Jones founded urban music publication *Vibe* voted Eminem 'the best rapper alive' and the 'best rapper ever'. Somewhat ironically, it was white rapper Eminem who, in the summer of 2009, was on the front cover of *Vibe*'s final edition.

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[24] Charles Aaron, quoted in Matthew Durington, 'Racial (Co)optation: Visualizing Whiteness in Suburban Space', at http://astro.ocis.temple.edu/~ruby/aaa/matt.html [accessed 22 February 2010].

[25] Elizabeth A. Wheeler, '"Most of My Heroes Don't Appear on No Stamps": The Dialogics of Rap Music', *Black Music Research Journal*, 11/2 (1991): 193-216, at p. 212.

While hip hop has embodied the continuum of blackface minstrelsy in its trajectory of white appropriation and commercial takeover, the genre embodies the legacy of minstrelsy in another key way: in its specific imagery of black masculinity. Among poor black youths, hip hop developed into a crucial critical voice in which in the face of oppression, machismo, male narcissism and themes of racially-charged violence stood for resistance and empowerment. But at the same time, paradoxically, this masculinity – particularly apparent in gangsta rap – is what has been historically constructed by others and imposed on blacks from 'outside'. In its strong anti-stance and black self-construction and representation, hip hop unfortunately reaffirms black male tropes of rage, violence, unpredictability and depravity rooted in minstrelsy and projected onto blacks so to inferiorize them.

Through his development of a rap/dance orientation, MC Hammer, however, stood apart from these prevailing tropes: with his high-energy dance routines central to his act, Hammer presented a black masculinity of a different sort.[26] Unlike other rap artists, Hammer was an entertainer and during his short reign (his career spanned just five years) he created a template of lavish performance values and showmanship, from his videos to his wardrobe and lifestyle (the last-mentioned leading to his bankruptcy in 1992). But as Hammer reached rap-star status with his style by appealing to white mainstream tastes, he received harsh criticism from other rappers and commentators for his clean-cut, camped-up image, which was seen as selling out. This culminated in 1990 with his third album, *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em*, and it marked the beginning of the end of Hammer's success.

The criticism Hammer received for exploring an alternative sort of black masculinity, together with the complexity of rap's more standard one in its re-articulation of traditional black male tropes constructed by and for whites, reveals the limitations imposed on black male self-representation today. Furthermore, in the case of Hammer and NWA this came at a time when white artists such as Vanilla Ice were apparently free to play with black *and* white masculinities.[27] Eminem's emergence only confirmed this disparity.[28] In this regard, the conventions of

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[26] The slick choreography Hammer brought to hip hop – what he described as taking vernacular African-American dance to the 'next level' – recalls the moves of black entertainers before him including James Brown (in his footwork) and the black vaudeville stars the Nicholas Brothers (in his various splits, leaps and slides) as well as reflecting certain elements of Michael Jackson's dance. As Lhamon details, along with Jagger's most common moves, Hammer's choreography relies on three central steps: what became known as the 'Hammer dance' or 'typewriter', the 'running man' and the 'butterfly'. All of these, as Lhamon documents, were danced by the performers of early blackface minstrelsy: 'What conveyed those moves was the blackface lore cycle.' Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 225.

[27] This is what Durington terms the 'Vanilla Ice virus': the projection of whiteness through the cooptation of blackness from a position of privilege and dominance, as the organizing principle in social and cultural relations. Durington, 'Racial (Co)optation'.

[28] This disparity is explored at length in Chapter 6 in which the masculinities of MC Hammer and Michael Jackson are set against that of Eminem.

minstrelsy have proven to be well and truly alive and kicking in the realm of hip hop.

White appropriation: love and theft

It must not be forgotten that in its various formulations traditional blackface minstrelsy was the symptom of love as well as theft: while minstrelsy ridiculed black men and women and black culture, it was a bold expression of and engagement with what it attempted to distance and control by denigration.[29] Present from blackface minstrelsy's outset, this desire may be found in each of the three examples of the continuum of the tradition above. In the case of the Hollywood musical this was revealed at least in private when white stars recognized black dancers as inspirational. As Fayard Nicholas of the Nicholas Brothers once commented in discussion of working with Gene Kelly in *The Pirate*: 'We had to tone down for him, although he told somebody that I was the only dancer who danced like him.'[30] Of the same token, a remark once made to Astaire by the Hollywood dancer James Cagney – that he had got 'a little of the hoodlum' in him – was one Astaire apparently deeply treasured for the rest of his days.[31]

There always remains a certain semantic paradox in terms of what Elvis Presley represented racially: Presley was a budding white musician eager to carve out a career but also one who had been raised poor in America's Deep South. There, Presley had been accustomed to white gospel (the white version of black church music) and listened to the local black radio station play Big Bill Broonzy and Big Boy Crudup (both of whom Presley would later name as influential in the development of his own musical style). This interracial background was one that minstrelsy's first 'star' T.D. Rice, as well as a good many other rock 'n' roll artists, had similarly experienced: Bill Haley, for example, picked up black musical traditions while working in industrial Detroit and on tour in his early career. For sure, Presley became symbolic of an overarching white control over traditional black expression but at the same time he undermined the dominant racial ideology of which he was a part. Presley neither sounded nor acted white or fully black and without the clear marker of the mask this was a brave act that destabilized a society otherwise firmly segregated.[32] Of note, rock 'n' roll emerged at a similar time to the Civil Rights movement and both worked to challenge 'the existing

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[29] 'Love and theft' is of course the paradigm of dialectics Eric Lott applies in his approach to nineteenth-century minstrelsy. Lott, *Love and Theft*. For the role of 'love' in minstrelsy, see Chapters 1 and 5.

[30] Fayard Nicholas, quoted in Wollen, *Singin' in the Rain*, p. 38.

[31] Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, p. 228.

[32] For some commentators, rock 'n' roll was not black or white but the voice of a 'southern proletarian', only to be hijacked by mass consumer culture. Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, p. 122.

authority' as 'forces for "integration"', as Linda Ray Pratt puts it.[33] Indeed, as rock 'n' roll broke down the colour codes of the music industry (and opposition to this galvanized its demise), de-segregation more broadly was underway, such as the banning of racial segregation in schools.

In his dual symbolism of racial disintegration and white monopoly of black representation, Presley, as with rock 'n' roll more generally, embodied the paradox of love and theft at the heart of traditional minstrelsy and this is the same for hip hop. T.D. Rice and Presley grew up in the interracial cultures of New York's Seventh Ward and the Deep South respectively, and many white rap artists, Eminem among them, have similar roots. With his trailer-park origins, absent father and drug-taking mother, a young Eminem had every reason to identify with the plight and aspirations of black youths.[34]

In discussion of the movement to white mainstream culture that hip hop witnessed, Matthew Durington draws on the 'wigger', the term used to describe a white youth, usually male (such as Eminem), who appropriates the symbolic traits of black hip hop. Durington sees this figure, as it exists in the suburb, as the contemporary manifestation of the blackface minstrel and looks to understand it in keeping with the arguments for 'love' in the second generation of blackface scholars. As Durington suggests, the wigger may be read as a symbol of a critical race consciousness, as an attempt to carve out a youth identity in a culture – the typical American suburb – generally still projected (since the historical population shift 'white flight') as middle class and white.[35] While the wigger in many ways affirms racial and class privilege (young white youths appropriating blackness in the interest of their own identity formation), the wigger is also a 'racial connective sign'. The wigger may be seen as a meaningful choice that does not confirm but disrupts a fixed socio-economic standard primarily coded by race.[36] With the rise of the wigger, as with Presley, came moral panic and this endorses Durington's suggestion that the wigger is about social resistance, about minstrelsy's 'love'. 'Moral panic is initiated', Durington explains, quoting Kenneth Thompson, 'when a "group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests"'.[37] In its conventions, gestures, tropes and images, the continuum of blackface minstrelsy carries with it the oscillations of love and theft; the complications and contradictions it has always embraced since it reigned supreme on the nineteenth-century stage.

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[33] Linda Ray Pratt, 'Elvis, or the Ironies of a Southern Identity', in Kevin Quain (ed.), *The Elvis Reader: Texts and Sources on the King of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 93-103, at p. 99.

[34] To what extent Eminem's 'narrative of the hood' was exaggerated in the interests of 'authenticity' and 'legitimacy' remains uncertain. For more on this subject, see Chapter 6.

[35] As Durington writes: 'We are not allowed to witness the contemporary multicultural suburb for what it is.' Durington, 'Racial (Co)optation'.

[36] In keeping with this, the term 'wigger' was first used to refer to whites who engaged with black people and black culture by those who objected.

[37] Kenneth Thompson, quoted in Durington, 'Racial (Co)optation'.

Chapter 4
Ghosts: Racial Fantasy and the Lost Black Self

This chapter explores more fully the legacy of blackface minstrelsy embodied by Michael Jackson, not so much its gestures and dance as its caricatures – its racial fantasies – and the impact of these on his cultural expression and subjectivity. This is done through the close interpretation of Jackson's short-film *Ghosts*. Relatively unknown, *Ghosts* is an extravagant film that Jackson produced in 1997 and it offers a rich text for discussion on the heavy weight of racial fantasy grounded in minstrelsy. A brief discussion of the self-presentations and controversies with which the offstage Jackson was beset works to reinforce the same. This role of white racial fantasy in the operations of contemporary black subjectivity that seemed to be at work in Jackson is laid out first by sketching the developments of blackface minstrelsy when black performers finally took to its stage (after the Civil War when their exclusion could no longer be so easily justified). In their late involvement in the tradition of representing themselves, black male actors remained limited by the fantasies of the blackface mask. Although it has been suggested that the critique of this was expressed, the racial fantasies of the tradition by this time were racial truths and profoundly deep-seated. This could only have had a mutilating impact on the black performer and his sense of any 'real' Self beneath.

Part I: Black performers in blackface minstrelsy

Although black men and women provided the subject of professional minstrelsy, and their culture much of its material, black entertainers were denied access to its stage: Juba was significantly the only black performer to find success during the antebellum years, the height of minstrelsy's popularity. An article that featured in the *New York Aurora* in 1841, written by Thomas Low Nichols, reveals the typical distaste of the time towards the idea of watching real black entertainers on stage. Nichols describes the predicament in which entrepreneur and owner of New York's American Museum ('museum' being synonymous with 'theatre') P.T. Barnum found himself when his star dancer John Diamond announced his departure from the troupe. Barnum scoured the various dance-houses of New York's Five Points district for a replacement but the only substitute he could find was a black performer (later known as Juba). This was problematic, as Nichols explains:

> It was easy to hire him; but he was a genuine negro; and there was not an audience in America that would not have resented, in a very energetic fashion, the insult of being asked to look at the dancing of a real negro … this would have been an insuperable obstacle.[1]

But having selected Juba to take the place of Diamond, Barnum found the solution, as the article goes on to detail: '[Barnum] greased the little "nigger's" face and rubbed it over with a new blacking of burnt cork, painted his thick lips with vermillion, put on a woolly wig over his tight curled locks, and brought him out as the "champion nigger-dancer of the world".'[2]

In 1865, by which time slavery in America was officially illegal, the federal government introduced a policy of Reconstruction across southern states in an effort to protect black Civil Rights. Despite being bitterly contested, the various initiatives of Reconstruction improved conditions for some blacks and this was reflected in the business of the minstrel show. By the end of the decade most minstrel troupes employed black performers and by the 1870s minstrelsy was providing a major gateway into show business. But at a time when white minstrel troupes had begun moving away from the traditional minstrel show and its plantation material, the new participation of black performers re-energized its old conventions. Billy Kersands, Bert Williams and George Walker, Ernest Hogan and Bob Cole, among the most notable black entertainers who emerged, found success for what was believed to be their 'authenticity', which allowed for the more direct ridicule of blacks by white spectators. Unlike their paler counterparts, who had danced and acted with much skill, the black minstrels of the postbellum years were objects on exhibit that 'behaved' and displayed their 'natural' impulses. As one playbill for a show by the Haverly Colored Minstrels in 1881 put it: 'The efforts of these much-abused and uneducated sons and daughters of Ethiopia are but the spontaneous outbursts of nature's gifts.'[3] Little surprise that the huge rewards that had been available in white minstrelsy were never made available to black minstrels.

As minstrelsy provided the most reliable route into entertainment for black artists (there was only the occasional band musician elsewhere) and one of the very few opportunities for black social and economic mobility, black entertainers had no choice but to conform to the tradition's caricatures as well as to the literal mask. While white men had constructed, acted and perfected their racial fantasies, black minstrels were forced to be them.[4] As one playbill from an 1845 New York performance declared: 'The entertainment to conclude with the Imitation Dance, by Mast. Juba, in which he will give correct Imitation Dances of all the principle

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1 Thomas Low Nichols, quoted in Lott, *Love and Theft*, pp. 112-13.

2 Thomas Low Nichols, quoted in Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 113.

3 Quoted in Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 206.

4 A very small number of black artists were lucky enough to break away from these conventions; of most significance was James Bland (known as 'the black [Stephen] Foster'), who found success writing popular song, but such a name was an exception.

Ethiopian Dances in the United States. After which he will give *an imitation of himself*.'[5] Black minstrels were spectres in a 'haunted realm of racial fantasy'.[6]

Traditional caricature in black minstrelsy

Among the black performers who found late success in minstrelsy was the comedian Billy Kersands who first began performing with travelling white-owned troupes in the early 1860s. Along with fellow comedian Bob Height, by 1872 Kersands was among the biggest stars of Charles Callender's Georgia Minstrels – the most successful of its kind. Under Callender, Kersands regularly featured in military burlesques, which had become a standard piece to close the first act of shows, and his acrobatic feats of drumming in these earned him his name. In his comic acts of song and dance Kersands went on to achieve unprecedented renown and by the early 1880s was black minstrelsy's highest earner.

Kersands was best loved for his caricature of the grinning, fat-lipped figure central to the minstrel tradition. Playing into the assigned attributes of ignorance and slow wit, Kersands accompanied his songs with a lexicon of comic expressions – smacking his lips (which were augmented with red paint) and sucking his molars – and the noises these made filled theatres with joy. In his extremity of exaggeration, Kersands went on to develop extravagant 'mouth routines' that involved the insertion of an entire cup and saucer into his mouth or billiard balls into his cheeks. He boasted that he had the largest mouth in the world and was once reported to have told Queen Victoria, while touring England, that if his mouth had been any bigger they would have had to move his ears.[7] Both black and white audiences, particularly in the South, loved every bit of Kersands's acts: 'The slightest curl of his lip or the opening of that yawning chasm termed his mouth', one commentator observed in the *Clipper* in 1887, 'was of itself sufficient to convulse the audience.'[8] However, while theatre-goers laughed at Kersands they were in awe of his dance. Kersands was a skilful dancer and acrobat and his signature move was the Virginia essence, now evolved from its early blackface days into the most graceful soft-shoe tap step.[9] Kersands was an extraordinarily talented dancer and his skill helped consolidate moves and see them become fixtures in vaudeville and, a little later, Hollywood.

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[5] Quoted in Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 115; my emphasis.

[6] Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 4.

[7] Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 254.

[8] Quoted in Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 256.

[9] Ragtime composer Arthur Marshall once described this move: 'If a guy could really do it, he sometimes looked as if he were being towed around on ice skates … The performer moves forward without appearing to move his feet at all, by manipulating his toes and heels rapidly, so that his body is propelled without changing the position of his legs.' Arthur Marshall, quoted in Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues*, p. 55.

All other black minstrels took to adopting similarly extreme imitations. Among them was the comedian Tom McIntosh, who based his acts on 'facial contortions and mouthings', and Sam Lucas, who sang of the delights of devouring possums. Alex Hunter, of J.H. Haverly's troupe, meanwhile, was billed 'the Natural Curiosity' and imitated bagpipes, bass viols and freight trains. For his finale Hunter placed a lighted candle on his head and, 'by throwing out his big lips' (as an 1880 playbill described), blew it out.[10] Selling themselves as 'Two Real Coons', Bert Williams and George Walker became the most popular black comedy team at the turn of the twentieth century, renowned for their dance routines, comic timing and mimicry. The pair was the modern expression of minstrelsy's most classic stereotypes: Walker, 'the sleek, smiling, prancing dandy' and Williams, 'the slow-witted, good-natured, shuffling Negro'.[11] After the death of Walker, Williams became even bigger, particularly among black audiences. Much of his appeal was in his comic 'Negro' dialect – an 'authentic' stage language supposedly belonging to black people but once described by Williams as being 'as much a foreign dialect as that of the Italian'.[12]

Another successful postbellum black minstrel was the comedian and songwriter Ernest Hogan, who went on to be the first black American to fully produce and star in a Broadway show (*The Oyster Man* in 1907). As with Kersands, Hogan pushed minstrel stage-types to their extremes and he became renowned for his parody of the slave. Hogan's caricature was a creature of appetite who, with lolling tongue, went into ecstasy over such 'lip-smacking' and 'mouth-watering' foods as melon, chicken, pork chops and ham.[13] In 'Watermelon Time', Hogan transformed the technique of watermelon eating into a highly comic act, thumping, smelling and savouring it in his primitive simplicity.[14] Hogan delighted audiences by playing out what they wanted to see in an extension of antebellum fantasies that saw black men defined by natural impulses and desires and reduced to body parts. As Nathan Huggins writes: '[Hogan] was insatiable in his bodily appetites; his songs and tales about food would make one think him all mouth, gullet, and stomach.'[15]

Along with their caricatures, black minstrels' songs were also based on self-ridicule. Among Kersands's most popular songs was 'Mary's Gone With a Coon', the lament of an old man whose daughter has chosen to marry a black man:

> He's as black, as black as he can be
> Now I wouldn't care if he was only yaller,
> But he's black all o'er, he's a porter in a store,

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10 Quoted in Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 254.

11 Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, p. 283.

12 Bert Williams, quoted in Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, p. 43.

13 Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, p. 251.

14 Ibid., p. 272.

15 Ibid., p. 251.

My heart it is tore, when I think de matter o'er
De chile dat I bore, should tink ob me no more
Den to run away wid a big black coon.[16]

While the text reflects the social unacceptability attached to cross-racial marriage characteristic of its time, it also illustrates the typical projection of a profound difference in sexuality between races: white innocence and restraint ('De chile dat I bore') versus a corruptive, all-consuming blackness (the 'big black coon'). Another of Kersands's songs, 'Old Aunt Jemima', articulates the same, one verse telling of the relationship between a bullfrog (the role played by Kersands) – large-lipped and over-powering – and a tadpole's daughter – all wide-eyed innocence and youth.

Although Hogan later took pride in avoiding the conventions of burnt cork, refusing to 'black up' towards the end of his career, he was made famous by, and remains best remembered for, 'All Coons Look Alike to Me', one of his earliest blackface songs. Written in 1895, the song proved to be not only his most loved, the biggest of the decade and hugely profitable (earning Hogan all in all a staggering $26,000) but also pivotal in the development of the 'coon song'. A genre hitherto unaccepted on the professional stage due to its association with brothels and 'low-life', the coon song was firmly legitimized by Hogan with 'All Coons Look Alike to Me'. This was done by the appropriation of minstrelsy's central convention: comic racial derision. While the title of 'All Coons Look Alike to Me' embodies the prejudicial stereotype that all blacks look the same, the song's sheet music, published in 1896, features illustrations depicting extreme stereotypes, as harsh as the crudest of the antebellum years. 'All Coons Look Alike to Me' caused a lot of trouble for Hogan, both on and off stage. For many Hogan had chosen commercial success over racial pride to a degree that far exceeded necessity.

Behind the mask of black minstrelsy

In the historiography of black minstrelsy, it has since been widely suggested that although black entertainers wore the mask because they had no choice, the meanings were not always so collusive. As Robert Toll argues, black minstrels 'developed masks and façades that allowed whites to indulge their racial fantasies, while blacks created their own hidden culture within'.[17] While this semantic dissembling is speculative on the part of Toll, it has become a common perspective and indeed one that is plausible: codified meanings, and in particular those generated through a process of semantic reversal, have been a covert mode of communication among black Americans since slavery.[18] As black members of minstrel show audiences

[16] 'Mary's Gone With a Coon', quoted in Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 256.

[17] Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 262.

[18] Semantic reversal was a device forged out of life on the plantation where the concealment of rebellious convictions or intent was a crucial strategy for survival: slavery

likely looked behind the mask for less direct meanings sneaked into song texts and stage gestures and reversed its literal meanings, whites likely overlooked or even failed to recognize this (although it remains unclear to what extent whites, from the masters of plantations to minstrel show audiences, were aware of black semantic play).[19]

The exaggeration typical of black minstrelsy, in which Kersands and others sold and portrayed themselves as a 'freak' entertainers, may be understood as part of this process, as not so much conspiracy in black self-depreciation as *non*-conspiracy through sheer extremity. Black minstrels reinforced white racial fantasies, acceding to them and bolstering them through the illusion that the black fraternity shared the same feelings. But Toll suggests that this extreme level of exaggeration actually assured black minstrels distance from the roles they played (for unlike most whites, they knew the real diversity of black people) as well as affirming group belonging through shared subordination and ridicule.[20] Kersands's popularity among black audiences strongly endorses this theory, for not only did Kersands receive much support from the black community, his popularity was also such that for his shows in the South black audience members, usually assigned to the gallery 'Nigger Heaven', occupied up to half the seats in the entire house, breaking the normal segregated seating rules. Kersands was not just popular among blacks in the South either, but in the Midwest and North too, with evidence suggesting the black fraternity there drew just as much pleasure as whites from

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was a system that functioned under the threat of violence and slaves did as they were told in order to survive. While they worked, slaves sang songs that often expressed contentment (with lines such as 'we love to shuck corn' and 'we'll make the money boys') in the hope masters would be fooled into believing their sentiment.

[19] The theory of semantic reversal has been applied to the lyrical content of songs in black minstrelsy, among them Kersands's aforementioned 'Old Aunt Jemima'. This song exists in three versions: two texts published in 1875 and a third in 1880. All versions begin in a church, the two early texts describing typical black worship practices, but the third describes a black singer who flees a white church when its congregation 'pray so long'. Among white audiences, blacks, who danced instead of prayed, were being lampooned, but among blacks, it could have been sanctimonious whites being made out to be the fools. A verse from one of the 1875 versions of the song also seems to point to this same semantic play when it lampoons black subordination, inferiority and credulousness but at the same time also seems to question, through a protest against whites' broken promises, the morality of slavery and pseudo-slavery: 'My old missus promise me / Old Aunt Jemima, oh, oh, oh [after each line] / When she died she-d set me free / She lived so long her head got bald / She swore she would not die at all.' 'Old Aunt Jemima', quoted in Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 260. For discussion of the song, see Toll, *Blacking Up*, pp. 259-61. With this sort of subversive quality in mind, 'Mary's Gone With a Coon' has the capacity to be less the confirmation of the ills of cross-racial desire than the challenge of it as the typical racial attitude of the time (as well as the questioning of the connotations of the 'big black coon').

[20] Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 258.

the most derisive material.[21] Not only did black audiences wilfully consume black minstrelsy, they also seemed to enjoy it.[22]

In his own discussion of black minstrelsy, Huggins identifies the complexities in meanings that must have arisen not only when black minstrels took on the standard roles of subservience, such as the slave, but also when they played roles above their station such as the urban dandy, mayor, policeman, clergyman and soldier. With these, Huggins argues, the tables were again being turned: 'For as the child preens and postures like an adult, and as the jester swaggers and bellows like the king, each, through exaggeration, is discovering the latent pretence and assumption of those they mimic … travesty often cuts both ways.'[23] It is very likely that black minstrels did not feel the unequivocal devotion and subservience to white folk that whites believed they did and that it was this that could be quietly expressed through minstrelsy. The mask certainly had the capacity to be a sign of falsity that could subvert racial defeat and turn it into revolt in a covert mode of communication familiar to black American culture.[24]

The 'real' black Self

Although the evidence would suggest black minstrels did find limited space for revolutionary action behind the mask, one must not underestimate the mutilating impact playing it must have had: the blackface mask was, after all, the nation's defining popular form, which spread worldwide, and white Americans' appetite

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[21] Ibid., p. 256.

[22] It remains important, however, not to overlook variegated subject perception and the ambiguity that was undoubtedly still at play.

[23] Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, p. 269. In these images and strategies of doubling through mimicry and the semantic ambivalence it creates, Huggins edges towards Homi Bhabha's post-colonial position on 'colonial mimicry': black colonial subjects' imitation of the colonizer that is almost the same but not quite. '[Colonial mimicry is] constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference … [It is] a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other … [but] also the sign of the inappropriate … a difference or recalcitrance which … poses an immanent threat to both "normalized" knowledges and disciplinary powers.' Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 122.

[24] This sort of semantic play, rooted in the enforced codification of communication in slave culture, became the basis for Henry Louis Gates Jr's interpretative model of Signifyin(g) – the aesthetic of the changing same – in African-American literature. This is the playful rhetorical, figurative manipulation of familiar linguistic material (through substitution, parody, satire, ambiguity, humour and other troping mechanisms rooted in oral traditions) to express or critique indirectly. See Henry Louis Gates Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Signifyin(g) has since been appropriated in black music enquiry as a mode by which to interpret lyrical content as well as music.

for it, in particular, was insatiable. To ridicule one's black Self was the only mode possible to publicly portray that Self and the idea of creating and maintaining distance from this could only have been a struggle, if not near impossibility. As Huggins writes of the mask:

> As much as it was a passport into the white man's consciousness, as much as it was assurance of safety for that private self behind the mask, it was also a dissembler to one's own eye. For to feel forced to parade in disguise before men who are hostile to all but their charade cannot but distort the hidden face. There is a danger of corrosion of the self in this pretence, and surely a rending of integrity. How, and when does one call upon the real self to dispel the make-believe and claim humanity and dignity? How could one make it clear that the public self was only a façade that covered a real man or woman?[25]

Huggins describes what could only have been the psychological reality for blacks, which was, through a cycle of denial, depreciation and acclaim, the submergence or mutilation of any 'true' black Self.

Huggins illustrates this process anecdotally with an incident that once befell Hogan while touring the Deep South when his on- and offstage personae became confused. As detailed by Huggins, while in the South Hogan went to a white box office in error where he was accosted by a white man who cursed and raised his fist, so Hogan 'beat him to the punch and knocked him down'. Hogan was quickly smuggled out of town and out of the country. Recalling the incident later, Hogan remembered: 'I didn't get myself together again until I was in Australia with my own company.' Hogan not only apparently forgot *where* he was but *who* he was – the point Huggins believes, whether the story is apocryphal or not, Hogan wanted to make.[26] Perhaps not altogether dissimilar, in his later years Tom Fletcher, who had been a popular black minstrel at the turn of the twentieth century, expressed the insult he felt from minstrelsy's new 'progressives' such as Bob Cole, J. Rosamond Johnson and Will Marion Cook. This was apparently felt by Fletcher due to their efforts to eliminate the grotesque caricatures to which he had faithfully adhered throughout his career and that he had come to believe were authentic characterizations of 'Negroes'.[27] Perhaps Fletcher, like Hogan, had 'forgotten who

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[25] Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, p. 262.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid. By this time all-black produced shows were emerging and gaining currency. These included the musical comedies such as Bob Cole's *A Trip to Coon Town* and Will Marion Cook and Paul Lawrence Dunbar's *Clorindy – The Origin of the Cakewalk* (both 1898) and Williams and Walker's *The Policy Players* (1899) and *In Dahomey* (1902). These musicals indeed represented unprecedented creative autonomy. They introduced more complex black characterizations and musical components though the weight of minstrelsy and its conventions lay heavy.

he was' in the travesty of minstrelsy to deny the recognition or even knowledge of any 'real' Self beneath.

This white command over racial identity and its impact on black subjectivity has percolated not only folklore but also much African-American literature and fiction. In his semi-autobiographical writings *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois encapsulates it in his theory of double-consciousness: the process of seeing one's black Self through white eyes. Du Bois was aware of this process throughout his life on feeling its psychological effects after the reassessment of his own identity (forced with his entry into the strictly racialized culture that was new to him as a young adult at Fisk University). Moreover, running as a thematic thread through the collection of essays that makes up *The Souls of Black Folk* is the veil: Du Bois's metaphor for the choking definitions of blackness from the white 'outside'. In its suggestion of differencing and separation – of 'othering' – the veil becomes synonymous with the mask. Du Bois writes:

> The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.[28]

On documenting his move from the French West Indian island of Antilles to France in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), anti-colonialist Frantz Fanon displays the typical mechanisms of establishment of the 'Negro' by the white world through what he terms the 'inborn complex'. Taking his cues from Du Bois, Fanon does this through the depiction of a series of encounters with whites in France, among them one he had with a young white boy and his mother. As Fanon describes, on his encounter, the boy, scared of the black man, threw himself into his mother's arms, shaking with fear that the 'nigger' might eat him. Having been seen through the eyes of the boy, Fanon writes of the effect: 'My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly.'[29] The mutilating blow of this encounter on Fanon's psyche is palpable. It was the same blow Du Bois had felt and that Kersands and Hogan had likely attempted to reconcile behind the literal mask of blackface.

Brought about by white racial fantasy, the idea of black social invisibility is equally pervasive in African-American literature, Du Bois's veil and its connotations, later felt by Fanon, being among its first explications. Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man* draws on the concept directly through the first-person telling of its protagonist's trials: an unnamed African-American man plagued

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[28] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, p. 5.

[29] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 113.

by the weight of the stereotypes of himself so that he is looked *through* rather than looked *at*. As Huggins puts it in relation to minstrelsy: 'The stereotype – the mask – defined the Afro-American as white Americans chose to see him; outside the mask the black man was either invisible or threatening.'[30] Though Ellison's protagonist bemoans his invisibility, on seeing its advantages he finds a way by which to embrace it by the end. But the outcome is not always so happy, as Fanon writes of the far graver effects among others:

> When the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an *actional* person. The goal of his behaviour will be The Other (in the guise of the white man).[31]

Part II: Michael Jackson's *Ghosts* and the legacy of black minstrelsy

Michael Jackson's elaborate feature-length short-film *Ghosts*, the world's longest music video, was created to accompany the track of the same name from the 1997 remix album *Blood on the Dance Floor*. For the film, the track is joined by two others: 'Is It Scary?', also from the album, and '2 Bad', from the 1995 double-disc album *HIStory: Past, Present and Future*. In the video, the three tracks – all film versions – are stitched together with segments of filmic score and propelled by a strong visual narrative. *Ghosts* tells the story of a small-town mayor's attempts to run out of town a freaky 'maestro' (played by Jackson) who is unwelcome for his peculiarities. Along with his townspeople (who are concerned for their children who play with this 'freak'), the mayor embarks upon a visit to the maestro's spooky mansion. But as the narrative unfolds the group's efforts to scare the maestro out of town are thwarted. Joined by a posse of ghosts and ghouls, the maestro terrifies his unwelcome guests with foolery and a collection of impressive computer-generated and prosthetics-aided physical transmutations.

While the video appears at times a macabre indulgence of the idea of self-change (perhaps the biggest preoccupation throughout Jackson's offstage life) so too, however, does it bring forth particularly vivid ghosts of blackface minstrelsy and, more specifically, black minstrelsy. The caricatures that postbellum black performers had no choice but to play (and that they did to unprecedented extremes) reappear here, similarly extreme, and so too, and also true to black minstrelsy, does their less apparent critique: the allusion to an alternative semantic content. But in its entertainment, *Ghosts* also encapsulates something less comfortable: the visualization of the mutilating impact this performative tradition

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30 Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, p. 261.

31 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 154.

– or over-definition from 'outside' – has had on black subjectivity, on the 'real' black Self, even to this day.[32]

As the video opens, the camera pans an eerie night-time graveyard. Dry ice swirls round the headstones and a crow squawks, then looks on, as the mayor and his entourage make their way in search of the maestro. Lightening cracks across the sky startling them: 'Th-th-th-that ain't a good sign', one of the townsfolk stutters; 'Perhaps we should turn back', suggests another. The group has now left the safe confines of their town, 'Normal Valley: For Nice Regular People' (or so the sign says, on top of which the crow perches), for 'Someplace Else', the maestro's haunted home. This 'othering' sets up the performative tradition of which *Ghosts* is a part and this process, central to minstrelsy, is palpable: the visitors to Someplace Else are fearful as they approach the maestro's home and the gates that guard the house allude to the unpredictability of a caged animal – how early black minstrels were portrayed.[33] But the video's performative frame of reference is also established at the outset by the presence of blackface minstrelsy's figurehead – Jim Crow – now assigned an avian reincarnation.

In discussion of the Jim Crow stage character in the context of early blackface minstrelsy, W.T. Lhamon draws out the crow's metaphorical use in American literature for social displacement (due to its inhabitancy in 'disturbed' social places such as between country and city).[34] Extrapolating from this, the crow for Lhamon is a symbol of existence on or by boundaries and he draws attention to this in an attempt to capture Jim Crow's semantic duality: the character's capacity to embody at once cross-racial distaste and attraction or, in more general terms, two semantic worlds. In *Ghosts* this is exactly where the crow first appears: at the edge of Normal Valley; on the boundary of Someplace Else. The crow not only references the performative tradition of blackface minstrelsy in which *Ghosts* works but also suggests its capacity for a covert semantic world, traditionally held together in black minstrelsy. This idea of an alternative semantic space in *Ghosts* is visualized as the opening monochrome shots (the last of which are of the mayor and townspeople who have now entered the maestro's great house) open out into a grand dance hall in full Technicolor, suggesting a different world. At this moment the spectator cannot fail to recall the corresponding moment in the Hollywood movie *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy leaves behind a sepia Kansas for the dramatic Technicolor of Oz. While this device is used in the musical to dramatize

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[32] The theme of ghosts, along with the devil and evil spirits, and especially the fear of them, was widespread in minstrelsy. A mode by which to theatricalize black credulousness, such themes also played into one of minstrelsy's much-loved myths: that excessive fright might turn black people white. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, pp. 125-6. The theme of ghosts, including zombies and doubles, is also deeply embedded in African-American discourse and in the constructions of slavery in particular.

[33] While the mayor is Caucasian, the townspeople are a mix of white and black Americans, perhaps implying that white and black are already in fact 'inside' each other.

[34] Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 172.

the narrative shift from reality to fantasy, black minstrels tried to demarcate the same within the confines of the blackface mask, as the evidence would suggest: behind the black minstrel's fantastical caricature was a real man whose likely aim was to critique that caricature and articulate, as best he could, a reality. In this regard, black minstrelsy was a performance within a performance. *Ghosts* and Jackson provide no exception.

Performance within a performance of the blackface mask

The centrepiece to *Ghosts*, in which the maestro scares his guests by realizing their worst fears, is a performance within a performance as black minstrelsy was. This layered performativity is alluded to by the great hall that the mayor and his townsfolk tentatively enter and that functions as a kind of stage. The crow is now perched up high looking down from the lofty rafters, perhaps invoking the crudely named 'Nigger Heaven', where the black audience of postbellum black minstrels was assigned. The maestro emerges from the shadows in a long hooded cloak, his face concealed behind a mask – the bony countenance of a skull. His visitors, now his audience, freeze with fear. But as the maestro lowers the mask all that is revealed is his smiling face. His guests heave sighs of relief. Jackson sets up the idea of acceding to the blackface mask through the maestro character but also of being something 'other' than it. This other is the reality that manifests as the film proceeds.

True to postbellum black minstrelsy, the maestro accedes to the qualities of the blackface mask – he is unpredictable and freakish – and he offers the grotesqueries his guests expect of him. With the aid of technology, special-effects guru Stan Winston and an extremity of exaggeration that reaches far beyond even that of Kersands's, the maestro enacts the minstrel's full-moon eyes and copious mouth with dangling lower lip and lolling tongue. As lightening cracks, comic facial contortions and postures, which had initially amused the maestro's guests, in a flash become grotesque computerized transmutations: with his fingers, the maestro pins open his mouth and eyes, so wide that pillowy flesh protrudes from their sockets and his eyeballs look set to pop out; then he grabs his lower jaw, yanking it as far as his chest, so that he becomes all mouth, lips and tongue (the last even taking on a life of its own) (see Figure 4.1).

The performance of the blackface mask remains centre stage for the dance that breaks out to accompany the short-film's first song, '2 Bad'. For this, wind blows up, doors and windows fly open then slam shut and the lights in the lofty hall flicker as the maestro introduces his 'family': a posse of cobweb-clad ghosts (who, costumed as actors, seem to be at once ghosts, historical personages – *commedia dell'arte* characters – and animals). Although on their arrival the maestro's family grimace at their guests-cum-audience, they bow and tip their hats – a false social nicety alluding to performance. Strongly reminiscent of the formations and gestures of Jackson's *Thriller* video, the dance that breaks out into '2 Bad' for much of the time suggests play and game. The posse, running amok behind the

Figure 4.1 Jackson's parody of the blackface mask in *Ghosts*

maestro, playfully mirrors its leader's moves – a conflation of robotic and ghostly manoeuvres including frog-like leaps and wide-knee steps. With shots cutting to the beat, the performance is also one of impressive acoustic mirroring. Animal-like vocables accompany the game and mark out the beat along with various rhythmic patterns that form complex polyrhythms and antiphonal effects. At various points here, and later, like his posse, the maestro bows, arms outstretched to his guests (the video's closing frame, after the credits have rolled, is of the same). The dance

also repeatedly features Jackson's iconic crucifixion pose, the maestro offering himself up to his audience. The maestro is ever-performing (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2 The maestro's crucifixion pose in *Ghosts*

Early black minstrelsy: the John Canoe inversion ritual

While *Ghosts* possesses ancestral traces of postbellum black minstrels, the likes of Kersands and Hogan had their own ancestors, for as early as the seventeenth century – well before white Americans first began 'blacking up' – blacks had been performing public put-ons of whites.[35] These white put-ons were brought on slave ships from the West Indies to North Carolina and Virginia and in the New World became known as the John Canoe inversion ritual: street theatre, including music and dance, for which slaves whitened their black faces and hair with flour in imitation of whites. As it dispersed, John Canoe developed into a crucial part of Atlantic slave culture, characterizing the festivities of important periods of controlled slave misrule. These included the 'Negro' carnivals and Christmas holidays that white masters occasionally allowed.[36] For such carnivals, a John Canoe was chosen to dress distinctly, often in a European grand style, to lead a retinue of musicians, dancers and other dramatis personae in their festivities. John Canoers visited dwellings inhabited by whites and liked especially to gather at the home of a local prominent citizen, such as the mayor, for whom, in exchange for money or food, they would present a rough and ready 'play'.[37] Along with their rejuvenating licence of misrule, these festivals also brought unusually high calorific intake as slaves consumed food and drink additional to their normal quota. Excess energy and alcohol-fuelled foolery thus abounded and John Canoe and his posse were rowdy and boisterous. Whites were threatened in various playful ways but if no reward was offered, or the revellers were made to feel unwelcome, real unrest broke out. Indeed, a full range of black rebellion and violence, from riot to murder, always had the potential to erupt. Beneath their revelry, John Canoe troupes were frightening.

Ghosts invokes much of the spirit and imagery characteristic of this first form of black minstrelsy. The maestro and accomplices, who are wild and unrestrained, certainly conduct themselves with an excess of energy: running up walls, hanging from the ceiling and back-flipping to the floor, slapping hands and stamping feet violently to the beat (patting juba), and collapsing to the floor as if dead, sometimes only to jump up again to repeat the move.[38] The townspeople remain uneasy, at times dumbstruck by either fright or captivation – it's difficult to tell which –

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[35] Much of the detail here relating to the John Canoe inversion ritual was sourced from Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*. See pp. 39-40 and 79.

[36] It was in these festivities that the cakewalk took off. This was a burlesque dance competition for which slaves imitated whites for the prize of a cake.

[37] John Mowitt has linked such black revelries to the wider traditions of charivari, meaning literally 'rough music'. See John Mowitt, *Percussion: Drumming, Beating, Striking* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

[38] The more acrobatic moves of the maestro's posse quote the exhilarating dance routines of the Nicholas Brothers in film musicals such as *Down Argentine Way* (1940), *Stormy Weather* (1943) and *The Pirate* (1948). Fred Astaire (well known to have been one

and within this uncertainty (entertainment versus fear), as with the John Canoe ritual, is a shift of control: the maestro's visitors, and the mayor in particular, who is predatory and defiant at the video's outset, are credulous and stupid by its close. Just as the slaves of John Canoe troupes disguised their identities behind flour, masks and costume in playful imitation of whites, so do the maestro and his posse: while the maestro – Jackson – performs behind his own familiar whiteface mask, his ghostly accomplices also appear to have undergone some sort of r/facial whitening for their performance. In a corporeal call and response led by the maestro, the ghosts pat juba, beating their bodies to create clouds of dust as thick and white as flour: the substance used among John Canoe actors in their efforts to simulate Caucasian skin tones. And all the while comedy and something quite serious oscillate: as the ghostly troupe bang out their dusty rhythms with grimaces that are at once frightening and enthralling, one character sneezes, another coughs and a jester's bells jingle.

The music that accompanied John Canoe festivities was specific and complex. As troupes warned villagers of their approach, they rattled chains, blew horns, banged make-shift drums, shook jawbones, howled and yelled. To white observers these were barbarous sounds. Similarly, the rowdy, self-made accompaniment in *Ghosts* of foot stamps, hand claps, grunts and groans – noise not music – created by the maestro and his family of ghosts assault white ideas of musical aesthetics so that the townsfolk cover their ears.[39]

Black revolt beneath the blackface mask

As the narrative of *Ghosts* unfolds the tables are turned, for he who is the prey at the film's start becomes the one in charge in a performance of black power beneath the blackface mask. The townspeople and the mayor, who carry Ku Klux Klan touches at the narrative's onset, go on to become figures of cowardice and ineptitude: they dared not believe in ghosts, or the supernatural powers of the maestro, and they can find no escape as they attempt to flee in their fear (doors close in their faces and the mayor skids and slips on the floor as he tries to run away). The performance of the mask, once demanded so keenly by audiences, then assumed of the maestro by the townsfolk, is now a test of endurance and one that must be endured to its end.

The climax to this process of power reversal comes at the moment when the maestro appears as a giant ghoul. For this character the maestro's face is augmented in size and transformed into a freakish countenance, as if in parody

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of Jackson's biggest idols) also dances such gravity-defying moves in the film musical *Royal Wedding* (1951).

[39] Musically there is strong reference to the work song in *Ghosts*, especially during the film's first song, '2 Bad', and in the lead up to its last song, 'Ghosts'. Here, diagetic machine-like sounds, generated by the maestro and his posse, interrupt the music while their hands and heels dig the floor like tools in earth.

of white fantasies of black ugliness. Towering over the mayor, and realizing the traditional white fear of an all-consuming blackness, the 'ghoul maestro' leaps down the white man's throat to be wholly internalized in his stomach. The mayor's guts gurgle and groan at the surprise offering. His obese stomach, now all the bigger, bulges as the maestro's limbs protrude to the beat. Straightening his tie and grabbing his flailing legs, the mayor tries to fight the physical impulses inside but he is now literally possessed. All he can do is succumb to the beat – he clumsily kicks, spins and grabs his crotch. The townsfolk laugh at the spectacle, which becomes the visual accompaniment to the film's third song 'Ghosts'.

Through the mask – its ugliness, freakishness and bodily impulses – the swallowed ghoul moment parodies white reserve and up-tightness, as could the dandy and other such 'respectable' characters when played by black minstrels. But the maestro also reclaims power by poking fun at what white actors in minstrelsy had to gain from playing with black bodies. As Huggins writes of these men (already quoted but worth recalling): 'White men put on black masks and became another self, one which was loose of limb, innocent of obligation to anything outside itself.'[40] This is not only a layered satire, however; the internalized ghoul also becomes a way by which to burden the white man with the curse of caricature, as the mayor is forced to adhere to it and its most distasteful bodily impulses: cannibalism, greed and uninhibited sexual display.[41] As if to ensure the mayor really understands the weight of its heavy load, the maestro then bursts open the mayor's chest with an outstretched arm that holds up to his new ugly countenance a mirror: Jacques Lacan's primary vehicle of identity formation (see Figure 4.3).[42]

For Lacan the mirror functions within the Imaginary register of subjectivity (the sphere of identification) in what he terms the 'mirror phase': the process whereby the ego finds its ideals and representations. This is when the Self first receives and internalizes an image of itself (at about the age of six months) and this image reflects for the first time a 'wholeness', a structural harmony (as the fundamental source of one's perception of Self) to be lived up to. However, as Lacan has it,

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40 Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, p. 253.

41 These are the characteristics alluded to in Fanon's encounter with the young white boy: 'Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up', references the historical mythology of blacks as figures of barbarism. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 114.

42 This recalls the iconic chest-bursting scene of the science-fiction movie *Alien* (1979) and its sequels (not least because the director of *Ghosts* was Stan Winston, the special effects artist behind a number of *Alien*'s extraterrestrial beings). In the movie the alien's embryo is known as a 'chestbuster', which incubates in a living human host from which it then bursts out. In *Ghosts* this reinforces, for those who know, that the maestro inside is 'alien', peculiar and other-worldly. Offstage, meanwhile, Jackson always had an affinity with the similarly alien character ET and he speaks the narrative on the film's soundtrack album. The two were once photographed together, Jackson's arms around the 'shoulders' of ET. Cynthia Fuchs notes the duo's similarities, 'their mutual alien-ness, their distance from the planet earth, [and] their ambiguous sex'. Fuchs, 'Michael Jackson's Penis', p. 19.

Figure 4.3 The mayor and the mirror in *Ghosts*

this harmony is an illusion for it masks the actual splitting at that moment of the subject into subject *and* object. As the mayor studies the reflection looking back at him it transforms into a ghoulish countenance that recalls a bullfrog in its proportions and complexion (the animal that Kersands appropriated in parody of the ugliness of his sexuality). The mayor asks his reflection (his voice now a deep 'croak'): 'Who's scary now? Who's the freak now? Freaky boy … Freak circus, freak! Who's scary?'[43] With his mirror, the maestro provides us with a visual representation of Slavoj Žižek's formulation of Lacan's mirror phase: 'only by being reflected in another man … can the ego arrive at its self-identity; identity and alienation are thus strictly correlative'.[44]

In sum, the maestro moulds a performance of black power out of a performance of the mask true to black minstrelsy. He does this by semantic reversal through double parody – he adopts the mask's features with an extremity familiar to earlier black versions of it – but also by his transference of it and its load onto the mayor. But that is not the end of the performance. When the final credits roll – behind which dressing-room footage reveals the modes by which the various characters were created (reminiscent of the ubiquitous scene of 'blacking up' in Al Jolson's films) – it is revealed that as well as the maestro the mayor too had been Jackson all along. The layers of satire, which were already quite dizzying (almost infinite if we trace back as far as John Canoe), have been compounded. At the video's final point, any understandings with which the spectator might have come away have been thrown into disarray. However, it is not only the audience's confusion as to who is who that is left rolling, for in numerous ways, or so it seemed, Jackson off stage was entangled in the mask as also apparently had been Hogan and Fletcher.

The mask off stage and the lost black Self

> [The] Negro … was comic and pathetic. The theatrical darky was childlike; he could be duped into the most idiotic and foolish schemes; but like a child too, innocence would protect him and turn the tables on his schemers … he was unrestrained in enthusiasm for music – for athletic and rhythmical dance … [and] he was insatiable in his bodily appetites.[45]

In various ways Jackson in real life continued to embody the mask that Huggins describes: apparently enticing young boys to his Neverland home (and admitting

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[43] It is the maestro from down within the mayor's stomach who utters this while it is the mayor who speaks in a kind of ventriloquial act that confuses location of the speaker and voice. Ventriloquism is etymologically linked to the stomach (Latin – *ventra*) and the ventriloquial voice was originally thought to be located there. See Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Lott has noted blackface minstrelsy's ventriloquial quality. Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 52.

[44] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 20.

[45] Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, p. 251.

he had them sleep in his bed), the peculiarities and self-indulgences, the preference for the simple company of children and animals, the poorly-judged public appearances and the bizarre extremes to recapture the childhood of which he was famously robbed. Jackson's sobriquet 'Wacko Jacko' was in fact the contemporary manifestation of the blackface mask.

With regard to Jackson's public perception as 'Wacko Jacko', Randy Taraborrelli, in the Jackson biography *Michael Jackson: The Magic and the Madness* (2003), notes how much of the persona was in fact first generated by Jackson himself. In Taraborrelli's telling, this included the macabre tales of buying the bones of the Elephant Man and sleeping in a hyperbaric chamber, the latter having photos to accompany it. Meanwhile, in a 2004 interview with British broadcaster Jeremy Vine, Lionel Richie (a long-time friend of Jackson's) was asked about the then-concurrent child sex claims facing Jackson. In his argument for Jackson's innocence, Richie responded by explaining how, simply with better cooperation with the authorities, Jackson could have quashed the allegations at their onset. And indeed, it was Jackson's own actions and presentation of them – in the 2003 Martin Bashir documentary *Living with Michael Jackson* – that had first got him into the mess. As Taraborrelli details the stories of the Elephant Man bones and the hyperbaric sleeping chamber as badly-judged publicity stunts, and Richie ascribes Jackson's most grave troubles to equally poor decision-making, both reveal an inability in Jackson to help himself. Even at one of the most crucial moments in his life, not only did Jackson fail to stop playing the game that was the mask's depiction of him, as Taraborrelli and Richie might argue, but it seems he was *unable* to stop. Perhaps it was not only us taken in by his pretence but also Jackson himself. For as Huggins writes of the effect on the black minstrels who performed long before Jackson: 'It was just possible that the trick had been too perfect; *legerdemain* had undone itself in a disappearance act where the self had vanished, but also the incantation to call it back again.'[46]

Over the years, through his ever-fading racial and gendered representability, we watched the 'disappearance' of Jackson. Through surgical and aesthetic interventions, Jackson became more and more remote, while the man who might have been, in the absence of all this, was increasingly denied. This disturbing process, which saw the creation of his own curious mask, in many ways can be seen to visualize the damaging effects of minstrelsy's racial fantasies, which, like Du Bois's veil, concealed the 'real' person beneath. And as Huggins notes, and Jackson's facial destructions visualized, not only was that 'real' Self concealed, it could not in fact be called back. The black Self, mutilated or repressed amid this game, was irreversibly lost.

It seems hard to imagine that this loss of the 'real' black Self is not being theatricalized in *Ghosts* at the alarming moment when the maestro rips off his entire face so that it becomes nothing but a limp prosthetic mask. He holds it up to the mayor as if giving it back – 'sprawled out and distorted'. His countenance

[46] Ibid., p. 263.

now his skull, the maestro laughs manically, still with wide eyes, teeth and tongue as if to emphasize the ubiquity of these features in black caricature. But amid the maestro's laughter, no sooner are we met by his skull than his face again (his 'mask'): with a sudden strike of both fists, the maestro cracks open his skull, its bony fragments falling away to reveal behind it the face that was apparently removed like a mask but that had nevertheless been there all along (see Figure 4.4). This sequence reveals an infinite layering but not merely of face and skull or mask and bone: the sequence dramatizes two Selves, one of which is a pretence or performance and the other one's absolute physical core (the only remainder of our existence once all its other elements have gone). So what of the 'real' Self that Du Bois refers to as the 'soul', which exists obscured from the white world behind the veil? In *Ghosts* this Self, this soul in which Du Bois and Huggins ultimately believe, appears nowhere to be found. Rather, the short-film, and its infinite mask/skull layering moment in particular, suggests that there is no 'real' Self, no truer maestro than the mask.[47]

According to the 1845 minstrel playbill, Juba 'imitated himself' and this is how many critics have understood Jackson: a sort of copy in a larger chain of his being. This is primarily due to the extensive dissemination of his pictorial past (so that he was never able to fully dissolve earlier images of himself) and his own self-reflexivity, his continual repetition of performance throughout his career as his choreography and gestural hallmarks remained predominantly unchanged.[48] But, at the same time, it was established by his equally continual surgical reinventions. As Susan Willis notes, with each new transmutation Jackson became a copy of himself, 'a simulacrum … whose moments of appearance signals the immediate denial of the previous Michael Jackson'.[49] Hence, he became a Self-Signifyin(g) chain: the lead singer in the Jackson Five, the sparkling performer of 'Billie Jean', the bashful teen in *Thriller*, the 'bad' guy in the subway, the smooth criminal, the man in the mirror – the list goes on and on.

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[47] The maestro's house, with its multiple doors, rooms and levels, which all lead to either dead ends or entrapment, functions beautifully as an allegory for this black psychological state: gates and doors open then lock themselves, in the wind windows fly open and slam shut, and the hall is not just a stage but also a cage in which the crow is trapped, as is the posse of ghosts that climbs its walls.

[48] This inability of Jackson's to escape his earlier Selves, and especially his 'darker' and much younger Self, was dramatized in the 1992 Pepsi ad in which an adult Jackson sings the Jackson Five hit 'I'll Be There', accompanying himself on a grand piano. His child Self appears in the doorway behind him and joins in the song and remains there as the adult Michael looks over his shoulder and sees him. The advert became widely disseminated across the internet after Jackson's death.

[49] Susan Willis, 'I Shop Therefore I Am: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture?', in Cheryl Wall (ed.), *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory and Writing by Black Women* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 173-95, at p. 187.

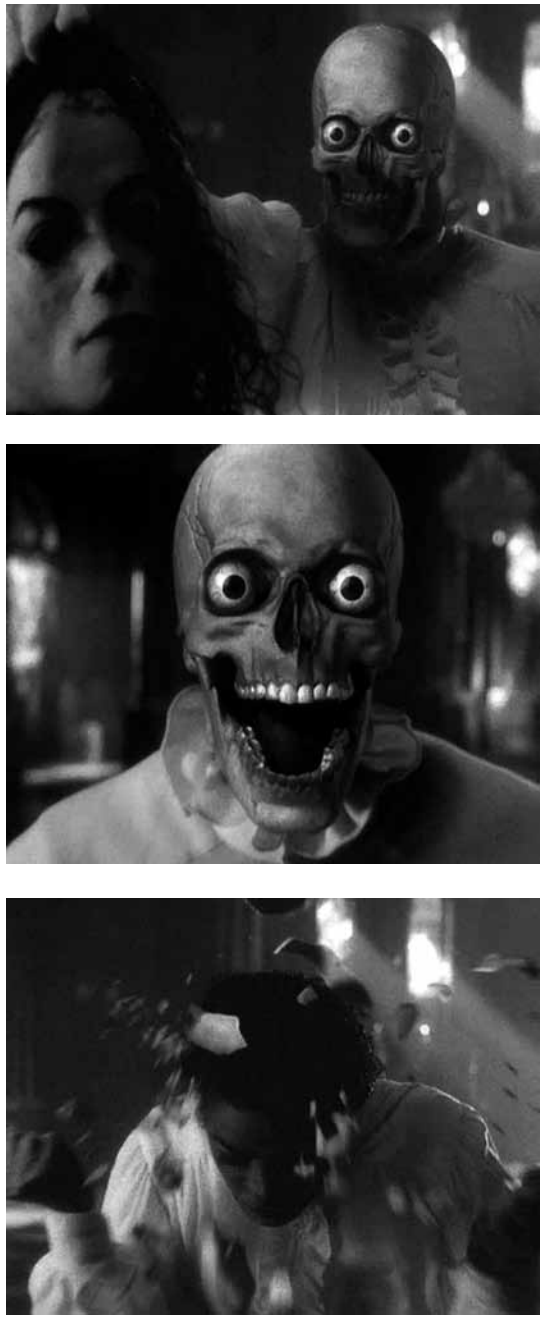

Figure 4.4 The maestro's layers of face and skull in *Ghosts*

Willis's formulation is engaging but in her discussion she writes of the little dark-skinned boy of the Jackson Five (drawing on Fredric Jameson): 'In Jameson's words, "the first time event is by definition not a repetition of anything: it is then reconverted into repetition the second time round." The Michael Jackson of the Jackson Five becomes "retroactively" a simulacrum once the chain of Jackson simulacra comes into being.'[50] This is where Willis's theory breaks down for, quite famously, the first Michael Jackson of the Jackson Five *was* a repetition of something: his age-belying performances were the artful simulation of James Brown, Jackie Wilson and Stevie Wonder. This 'first time' Jackson was not a copy of himself, as Willis rightly identifies, but he *was* a copy and, like Juba, this was of earlier performers and performances in his tradition.[51] As Michael Awkward notes, from the very beginning, Jackson's talent was defined by being other than who he was.[52] So with this in mind, who and where was the 'first time' Michael Jackson, the original Michael Jackson, Huggins's 'real' Self? Where, in the case of Jackson, was the place of original identification before the simulacra began?

As Jean Baudrillard's thesis of simulation goes there *is* no original, only substitutes, and this is the nub of Judith Butler's theories of gender formation. Deconstructed through the concept of performativity, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, gender categorization for Butler is merely a 'corporeal style'.[53] Butler makes the distinction between performance and performativity (the former presupposing there is an original subject, the latter not). Through this, Butler banishes the idea of a pre-existing 'actor', a 'doer' behind the deed: 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.'[54] Yet the multiple copies, created by and through discourse, create a mythical form that appears to have been there all along as the imitativeness of their origins becomes increasing obscured. Refuting the idea of any pre-linguistic inner core through the absence of any 'doer', Butler denies the idea

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[50] Ibid., p. 188.

[51] The young Michael Jackson's age-belying presentation of adult black masculinity reflects the contemporary cultural stereotype of the black child who is, as Tavia Nyong'o describes, 'always already streetwise, tough, and precociously independent'. Tavia Nyong'o, 'Have You Seen His Childhood? Song, Screen, and the Queer Culture of the Child in Michael Jackson's Music', *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 23/1 (2011): 40-57, at p. 52.

[52] Michael Awkward, '"A Slave to the Rhythm": Essential(ist) Transmutations; or, the Curious Case of Michael Jackson', in Michael Awkward, *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 175-92, at p. 189.

[53] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 139.

[54] Ibid., p. 25.

of the subject: the body is merely a phantasmatic surface.[55] However, Butler's dismissal of a pre-existing subjective depth has since been questioned. After all, with no subject, no 'I', where does this leave psychoanalysis, primarily concerned with just that?[56] Furthermore, as Seyla Benhabib asks in her critique, if there is no Self behind them, how may expressions of identity be changed?[57] Indeed, in the case relevant here, if there is no active Self would not all black American men then be like Michael Jackson? As Jane Caplan and John Torpey argue, despite cultural and social organization and over-definition of gender and race, 'human agency remains a decisive factor in the genealogy of identification practices, which tend … to generate strategies by individuals (and sometimes even by organized groups) to undermine their effectiveness.'[58]

Established by his earliest simulations of Motown stars, Jackson's performativity was sustained by his repetitions of Self. But in addition, this performativity was maintained by the polarities between his on- and offstage personae. For while on stage Jackson performed rather standard notions of black masculinity, off stage he strongly denied them in what Richard Middleton refers to as his 'oscillation between imagery of violence and of innocence': 'on the one hand, rapaciously potent, on the other, an emasculated husk'.[59] Moreover, off stage, where we might have expected the performance to break down so that the 'original', the 'real' might have emerged, we were typically met with still more complexities about performativity obfuscating the retrieval: the soft speaking voice (natural or unnatural?); the ever-feminizing features (the artifice of surgery or Jackson's own explanation, the will of 'adolescence'?); the blanched skin (vitiligo universalis or bleached?); the vulnerability (psychological effect or a put-on?); and the ambiguous sexuality that seemed, at best, resistant to pin down (asexual (the indifference), heterosexual (his marriages to Lisa Marie Presley and Debbie Rowe), homosexual (the very first rumours) or paedophiliac (the allegations)?). Michael Awkward concludes that identity for Jackson was 'essentially performative'.[60]

Yet somehow between all these complex and often contradictory layers of performativity, and perhaps because of them, there always remained, quite paradoxically, the promise of Jackson's full recovery: the promise of a 'real' that could be still be graspable. And indeed, fuelled especially by the polarities

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[55] Does blackface minstrelsy become, then, only an extreme form of a universal function: 'performativity' as the mode of subject construction?

[56] John Hood Williams and Elizabeth Cealy Harrison, 'Trouble With Gender', *Sociologist Review*, 46/1 (1998): 73-94, at p. 83.

[57] Seyla Benhahib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 21-2.

[58] Jane Caplan and John Torpey (eds), *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 7.

[59] Middleton, *Voicing the Popular*, pp. 129-30.

[60] Awkward, '"Slave to the Rhythm"', p. 189.

between on- and offstage Jacksons, the world relentlessly engaged in pursuit of this, from well before the enormous viewer ratings of the Oprah Winfrey interview broadcast in 1993, to well after those of the Martin Bashir documentary ten years later. A plethora of books and articles have been and continue to be sold with the promise of uncovering the true Michael Jackson, from Nelson George's early account in 1984, *The Michael Jackson Story* (which 'leads you into the heartland of his inner thoughts'), to the Michael Jackson Company's 2009 pictorial tribute *This Is It* ('discover the man you never knew'). The hunt has been so relentless that even the singer's acquittal from multiple child molestation charges in 2005 proved inadequate to call off the search, at least that for his 'real' sexuality. Within hours of the news breaking, American TV and British news broadcasters had hunted down jurors who were expressing concerns about the verdict (and accepting book deals). Every one of these instances embodied the hope of finding the true Jackson but every one denied it by a failure to perform.

In this respect, Jackson had the world in his hands, at once promising and denying the recovery of himself. Jackson played on this through his 'freaky' persona; what Michael Awkward suggests (at least in terms of the singer's 'transmutations') worked consciously as a ratings ploy.[61] Jackson's iconography consistently played on our pursuit. The 1990s, the era from which *Ghosts* dates, were typically characterized by images of Jackson that masked any details of his face, which was often shielded beneath a tilted fedora or entirely blacked out.[62] A decade later in his own iconography we failed to see the man at all. Jackson's last releases (while alive) – his final new-release single, 'One More Chance', last album, *Number Ones*, and DVD of the same name – all had selected for their covers a computerized image of Jackson's feet in the famous toe stand pose while offering nothing pictorial in their inlays. As the search was stepped up, Jackson's visibility diminished; de-visualized, Jackson enticed us to consume.[63]

Ghosts embodies much of this. The film entices us to consume in numerous ways, from the last-minute discovery that Jackson had been the mayor all along (so that we need to check it out all over again), to a narrative that restarts at its close: when the townspeople finally decide that the maestro is not so scary after all one of the boys goes to peel away his face, as the maestro had his, and we hear terrifying screams as the camera cuts to a long-shot of the house, now back in monochrome.

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[61] Ibid., p. 183.

[62] This sort of tantalizing imagery emerged in the publicity for the Oprah interview in 1993. Awkward, '"Slave to the Rhythm"', p. 183.

[63] This is also symptomatic of a broader process: that commodities *as such* continually promise a content they cannot deliver and while the commodification reaches ever further, this disappointment becomes all the more identifiable. Willis acknowledges this in her approach to Jackson and she too draws a close relationship to minstrelsy ('a metaphor for the commodity … the sign of what people paid to see'). Willis, 'I Shop Therefore I Am', p. 189.

But most centrally, *Ghosts* titillates then obfuscates our attempts at retrieving the 'real' Jackson or, in boarder terms, a 'real' black Self – an original. This climaxes when the maestro rips his whole body's surface away, treating not just his face this time but his body's entire flesh as a removable prosthetic part. As Jackson enacts this trick the narrative cuts to the townspeople's looks of horror to tease our intrigue over the image left behind. We ruminate over what we have not yet seen. A naked maestro? Or a naked Jackson? Or better still, the 'real' Jackson we so desperately long to recover? But when the camera returns, rather than any of these, we are confronted by the maestro's skeleton. Naked, but for his glitter-socks and loafers, the skeletal maestro dances the gestural hallmarks of his fully-fleshed form – moonwalking, crotch-grabbing and spinning. He is all struts and bravado; not only because he is now the one in charge (pulling the tormented mayor by his tie at one point) but also perhaps because he is controlling us, the audience, as well. Like the face/skull layering moment, and the singer's iconography more broadly, the stripping maestro embodies promise, titillating our desire for the 'real' Jackson then checks it by denial of his existence: all he gives us is the hollow, burnt-out countenance of a skull, and a dancing skeleton whose ribcage we can see right through. There really is *no* Jackson. In fact, the socks and loafers suggest that even now he still performs so that there is neither an origin *nor* an end, as Butler's theory of identity goes. Perhaps this was a critique, an attempt to call a halt to the relentless search for him, which, successful sales ploy or not, nevertheless dogged his existence. Yet in *Ghosts*, as was the case in Jackson's 'real' life, no sooner is this denial made than the search is re-established. For during the film's closing credits footage of the making of the skeleton scene is shown, in which Jackson dances in a black catsuit (on which the skeleton's axes have been marked). Perhaps under *this* the real Jackson might emerge? The hopeful search starts over.

Retrieval of the lost black Self

While Juba, the first black minstrel, 'imitated himself' Jackson embodied multiple copies of himself – ghosts of ghosts – through both his repetition of performance and his continual surgical transmutations. But he also embodied the ghostly presence of others in his tradition: Kersands and Hogan (extremity of exaggeration), Jim Crow (the natural and uninhibited, knee-bent and spinning), Dandy Jim (the ruffled and stylish) and John Canoe (violent and entertaining beneath the whiteface mask). These were all held together in Jackson's pale, gaunt figure, whose countenance in later years had its own ghost-like quality. *Ghosts* is the theatricalization of these metaphysical, ghostly amalgamations.

But despite Jackson's apparent continual performativity there always remained suggestions of a 'doer' behind them: that he successfully played on it to entice us to consume him surely points us to this. But his mask worked to suggest a 'doer' too, for while it remained a symbol of his performativity (rooted in the façades of the blackface mask) it did symbolize a truly active Self. We should remind ourselves here of Steve Perry's reading of Jackson's changed face as representative of

'a new class of being altogether: free, mobile, empowered, colourblind – the "new breed"'.[64] Jackson's racial transmutations were his own, very real negotiations of the performance. As theorist Jay Prosser writes with regard to the transsexual (a figure that also resonates with Jackson): 'there are transgendered trajectories, in particular *transsexual* trajectories, that aspire to that which this scheme [of ever-performativity] devalues. Namely, there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, to *be*.'[65]

Jackson reifies Žižek's spectre: that ghostly part in Žižek's ternary structure of ideology by which to distinguish between the ideological and the non-ideological.[66] Žižek's spectre (which stems from Marx and dates from the Frankenstein and doppelgänger fads) rises as a phantasmatic symptom of ideological breakdown, when ideology ultimately fails to completely account for the Lacanian Real (that raw materiality we do not have access to except as mediated by reality). Žižek demonstrates how the symbolization of the Real is, and cannot be, complete and how the spectre appears and is employed at these failed moments.[67] These same moments are also sites of antagonism: the only real, non-ideological available (what is actually 'out there', the Real) that threatens the Symbolic with ruptures, excesses and lacks. The spectre – a ghostly figure that closes the circle of reality – makes ideology work and in this guise the spectre seems real (it has materiality). Our investment in it is totally irrational for the stuff it covers interferes 'with the endeavours of social reality' and 'unavowed particular power interest' (hence the antagonism) and therefore cannot be acknowledged.[68] Yet although the spectre is drafted in to conceal the breakdown of ideology there is still residue of this hidden stuff. Even with the spectre in tow, the Real bubbles up around its edges. Here, Žižek appears to make a distinction between the spectre and what he refers to as 'spectral apparitions', which 'emerge in [the] very gap that for ever separates reality from the real … [while] the spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality'.[69]

Žižek's spectre may be used as a metaphor for the racial caricatures of blackface minstrelsy. Jim Crow – the song, the dance and the image – rose up and made the ideology of race, grounded in the belief of absolute racial difference, work (and

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[64] Perry, 'Ain't No Mountain High Enough, p. 84. See Chapter 2, Part II for an extrapolation of this.

[65] Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 32.

[66] This triadic formulation – the Symbolic, the Real and the Spectre – was born from Žižek's dissatisfaction with former binaristic structures of ideology and reality, which, he argues, fail to bring out the non-ideological (for if ideology is all-pervading, as the thesis goes, how can we distinguish it?).

[67] Slavoj Žižek, 'The Spectre of Ideology', in Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (eds), *The Žižek Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, c.1999), pp. 53-86, at pp. 73-4.

[68] Ibid., pp. 54 and 63.

[69] Ibid., p. 74.

its symptom was the antagonistic opposition to such oppression). Moreover, the elements that made up Jim Crow were all real in a sense, they had body, but their realness was fantastical: Jim Crow was a wholly irrational figure that hid from view the impossibility of racial totality. As we know, much was invested in these bodily figures and antagonism was the cause, and often the result.

One might understand Jackson's mutilated and racially indistinguishable body as a site of antagonism, for with its promise of Perry's 'new breed' it has disrupted the ideology of race, and in particular the part that believes in the unbridgeable gulf between races, at least in terms of a recognizable collection of physical features. Each ghost of a ghost of a former Self invoked by Jackson is a rupture bubbling round the edge of Jim Crow, who is also invoked by Jackson. These are the constant rumblings of the Real, still left unexplained and appearing as spectral apparitions but that are in fact evidence of, to use Žižek's words, 'the authenticity of our life-experience from outside'.[70] Yet Jim Crow curiously lingers, testimony to the immortality of the spectre and symbolic of what Žižek refers to as the distorting 'non-spontaneous machine' of ideology.[71] This could be seen as being aestheticized in Jackson's robotic moves – all mechanical and jerky – that feature quite heavily in *Ghosts*. But Žižek also notes how the spectre emerges not only at sites of antagonism, but also amid 'something even more horrifying: freedom'.[72] Perhaps we have finally found Perry's free and mobile 'being', Butler's elusive original and Huggins's 'real' Self. If so, Jackson becomes totally real, '"deeper than depth itself", more real than reality itself'.[73]

[70] Ibid., p. 71.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid., p. 80.
[73] Ibid., p. 82.

Chapter 5
Turnaround: Love and Theft

The legacy of blackface minstrelsy can be found not only in the work and subjectivity of Michael Jackson, but also in his audience and others around him. This chapter investigates this legacy in the case of Westlife's *Turnaround*: the Irish boy band's 2004 world tour, later released on DVD, for which the group appropriated Jackson's imagery and dance. *Turnaround* provides an example of the continuum of blackface minstrelsy in its white appropriation of black cultural idioms but more specifically in the boy band's relationship with Jackson in their role as his 'audience'. While *Turnaround* is approached in the contextual frame of minstrelsy, it is closely analysed in relation to that of the Hollywood movie musical, one of the new forms of minstrelsy of its day (and, in many ways, the generic precursor of the music video).[1]

Although the Hollywood musical initially featured 'blacked up' novelty numbers, with the growing unease over racial stereotyping it later dropped them and became increasingly defined by the heavy appropriation of black song and dance. Meanwhile, black performers remained almost entirely absent. This was what minstrelsy had developed into. In its appropriation of much of Jackson's most recognizable iconography and stage gestures, *Turnaround* represents the contemporary manifestation of this performative lineage. Like traditional

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[1] Chapter 3 details this development of minstrelsy after its classic demise, including the specific case of the Hollywood movie musical. Meanwhile, the music video is the genre Jane Feuer has described as 'the ultimate "postmodern musical"'. Feuer, *Hollywood Musical*, p. 132. Indeed, the music video, although with new conventions of its own, provides a contemporary cultural form in which characteristics of the film musical continue to play central roles long after its classic demise: the layering of music and song over image, and dance in particular; the flow and visualization of a narrative through song, dance and set; and the common use of direct spectatorial address. It is perhaps not surprising that in the extensive back catalogue of the music video's most elaborate exponent, Michael Jackson, the most consistent and direct references to the Hollywood musical may be found. Jackson reconfigured numerous Hollywood musical classics in a larger body of cinematic work (which also takes from the horror and gangster movie genres) that Jodi Brooks describes as 'Hollywood according to Michael Jackson'. Brooks, 'Ghosting the Machine', p. 376. 'You Rock My World' and 'Smooth Criminal' both recreate *The Band Wagon*'s film-noir-style 'Girl Hunt' finale in iconography, narrative and dance (as well as referencing *Swing Time* and *The Wizard of Oz*). 'Beat It' reformulates *Westside Story* while the panther postlude of 'Black or White' reconfigures and, as Brooks insightfully explores, critiques *Singin' in the Rain*. See Brooks, 'Ghosting the Machine', pp. 375-8. Other references to and reworkings of the Hollywood musical abound in Jackson's cinematic work.

minstrelsy, and the Hollywood musical, Westlife's appropriation of Jackson (that is, blackness) is at the same time central yet marginalized as Jackson's creativity was never credited. But amid this ungrateful and unacknowledged use, typical of minstrelsy, this black appropriation is far from one-dimensional for it may be argued that attraction for what is being thieved lurks and indeed was the very motivation for it.[2]

One might ask why, in relation to *Turnaround* and Michael Jackson, this process of cultural exchange – which ever end of the spectrum of appropriation it might represent – matters in the postmodern era and multicultural pop culture we occupy. Indeed, unlike the eras of traditional blackface minstrelsy and the Hollywood musical, we now live in an era of the 'global vernacular' in which cultural appropriation has become merely 'influence' or 'borrowing'. But as the debate on *Turnaround* and its relationship with Jackson unfolds, it becomes wholly evident why all this matters very much. Whether *Turnaround* symbolizes a theft of or a 'love' for Jackson, Westlife uses him to their own ends. This convention – of blackness meeting the needs of whites – lies at the heart of blackface minstrelsy.

The continuum of blackface minstrelsy: *Singin' in the Rain*

> It could be argued that there was a perverse honesty to traditional blackface. In its own way, *The Jazz Singer*'s blackface act does point to where credit might be due. Not so *Singin' in the Rain* … [which] keeps its energy source firmly covered.[3]

Although black cultural forms defined the Hollywood musical in its production their source was firmly denied and black artists remained entirely marginalized. As Carol Clover describes it: '[The film musical showcased] white performers who danced the art of unseen others.'[4] The title number of probably the most famous Hollywood musical, *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) – Gene Kelly's fun-filled dance through rain on a puddle-filled street – provides an example of the centrality of black cultural language yet black marginalization typical of its genre.

'Singin' in the Rain' is the joyous expression of falling in love and the dance that accompanies it is equally exuberant. The number begins as Kelly's character, the movie idol Don Lockwood, kisses singer Kathy Seldon (played by Debbie Reynolds) good night on the porch of her city home. Despite a heavy downpour, Kelly then waves off a cab in preference for walking home in the rain. The number begins as Kelly makes his way down the street: his jaunty stroll is intercepted by a

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[2] For discussion of cross-racial attraction in traditional minstrelsy, see Chapter 1. In the larger debate this attraction is what separates parodic representation from imitation. This is presented in Chapter 6 with a very different sort of imitation of Jackson by Eminem.

[3] Clover, 'Dancin' in the Rain', p. 740.

[4] Ibid., p. 744.

leap up onto a lamp-post and when he jumps down the sequence begins in earnest. Kelly's routine is based predominantly on tap – the genre, as the evidence would suggest and despite its diverse roots, first performed by slaves and later developed by black minstrels and vaudeville entertainers.[5] Kelly's dance also comprises a collection of non-choreographical moves and a lexicon of traditionally black gestures. Direct to spectator, Kelly performs a crisp tap routine before the window of a drugstore – the pavement his stage – then, legs wide apart, arms outstretched, he jumps from puddle to puddle. Kelly bends deep in wide-knee, frog-like steps typical of much 'angulated' black movement and dance as he jumps and splashes in the water-filled holes specially dug out for the scene.

By far the most ubiquitous gesture in the sequence, and which connects the routine directly to the tradition of blackface minstrelsy, is the turn: Jim Crow's 'weeling and turning and doing jis so'.[6] The centrality of this feature in Kelly's number is established at the very beginning, as the first strains of the melody are heard. Here, Kelly does a 180° turn to greet a fellow pedestrian, who himself turns towards Kelly as he scurries off in the rain. This mirrored turning is then repeated with the appearance of another couple of passers-by. Trying to keep dry beneath a newspaper held overhead, the raincoat-clad couple do a 180° turn in their fleeting wonder of Kelly's antics and Kelly turns towards them in a synchronized turn. The turn continues to feature in the brassy, bold second half of the song's instrumental, which marks the climax to the dance and for which Kelly stops his song and leaves the sidewalk for the street. In a sequence of turns round and round, Kelly traces a broad circle in the road, arms out in front twirling his umbrella in its own 'turn about'. Then, with one foot as pivot submerged in a puddle, Kelly traces another smaller circle when a policeman comes into the frame, arms crossed in disapproval of Kelly's glee. As the policeman looks on, Kelly stamps in the water as he turns a few more times before turning back to the sidewalk. The turn is the gesture that closes the number: for the song's last line – 'I'm dancin' and singin' in the rain' – Kelly turns on his heel and goes on his way, 'spinning' a final 180° so to hand his umbrella to another passer-by.

It is not merely black dance steps that define this famous number but also black performative aesthetics. Kelly's dance is apparently entirely impromptu, spontaneously arising from the joys of falling in love, which even the rain cannot dampen. To portray this, the routine features numerous non-choreographical or non-standard moves as he skips and prances and plays in the rain at complete odds with the tightly organized and rather more restrained routines of ballet and ballroom (the European dancing traditions that also filtered into movie choreography). In a curious ironic twist, in the routine's high-energy, light-hearted disregard for European restraint, Kelly glorifies those attributes central to black caricature in

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[5] Chapter 3 details the origins and originators of tap.

[6] Jim Crow's signature song and dance, which T.D. Rice first took to the theatrical stage, both involved the turn: 'Weel about and turn about and do jis so / Ebery time I weel about, I jump Jim Crow' was then followed by a demonstrative turn or spin.

traditional minstrelsy: natural, impulsive, nonchalant, content in simple pleasures and bodily (Kelly's moves are athletic and, at moments such as the leap up onto the lamp-post, near-acrobatic).

Despite the number's centrality of black gesture, dance and aesthetics, credit has been routinely given to Kelly. In Peter Wollen's otherwise comprehensive study of the scene, by way of conclusion the only exceptions to Kelly's credit are, quite typically, brief acknowledgements to co-director Stanley Dohen and musical director Roger Edens. Denying any other cultural influence but instead foregrounding the talents of Kelly, Wollen writes:

> It is clear that 'Singin' in the Rain' is a summation of Gene Kelly's own work up to that point, echoing and developing numbers he had done in earlier films, crystallising the principles and ideas about dance and film which he had been forming, consciously or unconsciously, since early childhood, more intensely still since his arrival in Hollywood.[7]

Kelly himself explained the inspiration for the dance was found when he thought of children 'splashing about in rain puddles and decided to become a kid again'.[8] In 'Singin' in the Rain', as in the realm of the movie musical more broadly, black culture was brought centre stage yet paradoxically always publicly denied (even though Kelly and other white actors acknowledged veritable black talent in private).

Westlife's *Turnaround* and its 'unseen other'

The Irish boy band Westlife (Nicky Byrne, Kian Egan, Mark Feehily, Shane Filan and, in the original line-up, Bryan McFadden) was formed by Irish pop producer Louis Walsh in 1998 following the formula and run-away success of Take That and their off-shoot Boyzone (also Irish and managed by Walsh). Cast from the mould of other 'boy bands', Westlife (who disbanded in 2012) were the epitome of their genre: white, clean-cut and aesthetically pleasing 'boys' (including two strong singers and two not so) performing ballads written for them (and covering the odd pop classic to mix things up). Especially in their early years, Westlife received light-hearted criticism for their lack of animation on stage and in particular for their preference, when singing, to perch on stools, only to predictably stand up at the infamous key change in each of their formulaic ballad hits. The boy band's 2001 world tour, *Where Dreams Come True*, was unofficially nicknamed 'the no stools tour' in response to the criticism and, more than likely, to help sell it

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[7] Wollen, *Singin' in the Rain*, p. 29.

[8] Gene Kelly, quoted in Tilly Stratford, '"Singin' in the Rain" – a Classic Movie Scene', at http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A852770 [accessed 2 June 2010].

as new and exciting.[9] In the spring of 2004, having just seen the departure of one of their lead singers, Bryan McFadden, Westlife embarked on their 56-show world tour *Turnaround*. The performance of the show given in Stockholm was filmed and released on DVD later that year, entitled *The Turnaround Tour: Live from the Globe, Stockholm*. For *Turnaround*, the group and their management had apparently found a way to sell Westlife as new and exciting.

Turnaround comprises five sections each with its own visual style and corresponding set of musical numbers. The first of these, an extended introduction of four songs, invokes Gene Kelly's famous 'Singin' in the Rain' number. This is made evident by the stage set that includes proscenium, lamp-posts and scenes of a rainy city street on a big screen. For this section Westlife appropriate Michael Jackson's distinct dance, gesture and iconography in their entrances and as part of their more energetic dance routines. In addition, they wear suits and fedoras reminiscent of Jackson. The second section of the show, for which the visual style changes comprehensively, is representative more of the typical Westlife presentation. The quartet sit perched on stools before a backdrop of sheer curtains, which brings the stage inward to a more intimate setting. Having ditched the suits and fedoras of the introduction, the boys don jeans and t-shirts for a more casual style. In this segment the foursome sings three slower numbers – typical ballads that are close-miked and breathy. For the fourth section the boys sing on a gantry extending over the audience and this is similarly representative of the group's more standard presentation. Furthermore, their pop ballads, in lyrics and tune, have now become obviously samey, as have their personae and choreography. For the section that comes between these two, the stage becomes a disco setting with multicoloured lighting, dry ice and pyrotechnics. This section is made up of a medley of some upbeat covers and, like the opening set, involves some high-energy dance routines, this time particularly crisp and synchronized but standardized. The boys wear smart blue suits. The finale is made up of three songs and comes after Westlife have said their goodbyes and apparently left the stage. The lads return, dressed in identical white suits and, at the show's real close, disappear in dry ice through the stage floor. It is the show's introductory segment, and somewhat premature creative climax, with its appropriation of Michael Jackson's gestural language and iconography set in 'Singin' in the Rain' that is of particular relevance and interest.

Turnaround opens with audience screams and an empty stage, in darkness but for circling search lights before a star-studded backdrop and raised oval screen. The stage is set with a raised proscenium with a central set of steps running down to the stage floor. The stage itself is ornamented with four lamp-posts. Comic-strip

[9] Westlife's fondness for stools dogged them to the end as an article in October 2011 reported in the Irish *Independent*: 'The stool manufacturing industry is said to be inconsolable after news that Westlife are to split next year.' Will Hanafin, 'Stool Manufacturers Mourn Westlife's Demise', at http://www.independent.ie/lifestyle/stool-manfacturers-mourn-westlifes-demise-2914286.html [accessed 12 April 2012].

animation on the suspended screen overhead projects a cityscape and driving rain and then, in turn, each member of Westlife, who are brought by taxicab to 'Roxie's Bar'. Each, when he appears, wears a raincoat and fedora (one of them carries a newspaper underarm, another emerges from behind one) and we hear the cab's engine as it pulls away and the sound of footsteps given heightened audibility on the wet bitumen. The name of each Westlife member appears in bold letters. Amid the audience's hysteria, an introductory bass riff, momentarily infused with the 'Pink Panther' theme, starts up from Westlife's band, which, drowned in shadow, the audience and spectator at home cannot see.

The Jackson choreography and iconography that characterizes *Turnaround*'s opening segment is established at the outset with each boy's entry: each Westlife member appears out of the dark, brought to life by spotlight and heightened audience screams to perform a fragment of dance Jackson-style – a spin, a kick, a stamp – then he freezes in a Jackson pose, face beneath his fedora. Most notably in the opening number 'Turnaround', the segment goes on to be defined almost entirely by Jackson-rooted gesticulations and conceptions, especially those belonging to the gangster-themed 'Smooth Criminal' (1987) and 'You Rock My World' (2001) (both of which feature a suited and fedora'd Jackson who, in an urban nightclub scene, fights off hostility through dance and wins the woman of his desire).[10] Interspersed only with non-choreography (allowing for each Westlife member's acknowledgement of the audience and movements across the stage), Westlife's dance, with fedoras pulled low, is Jackson's and specifically that of 'Smooth Criminal': heels and toes, taps and struts, spins and turns, angulated poses, wide-knee and bent-knee steps and certain 'robotic' moves, leanings and nods (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2). This dance and iconography of Jackson's is confined to the show's first segment: Jackson's style is 'put on' and 'taken off' like the traditional blackface mask. But as the show develops through its other sections, relapsing into a rather blander pop presentation more typical of Westlife, it retrospectively becomes the show's highlight. Westlife's marketing team knew this all too well, for it was screengrabs taken from the opening Jackson set that were used for both the tour and the DVD's promotion, the DVD's cover (front and back) and most of its inlay images.

Though less so now, what was particularly alarming at the time of Westlife's *Turnaround* was the apparent immediacy of its appropriation of Jackson imagery and dance. While Jackson's untouchability had already been in question for some time (since the first accusations of child molestation in 1993), in early 2004, when *Turnaround* kicked off, Jackson's creative career had only just neared a potentially non-retrievable demise. In the months leading up to *Turnaround* Jackson had been arrested for and charged with ten child sex offences and had had two court-room

[10] While Jackson's 'Smooth Criminal' and 'You Rock My World' draw on the gangster movie (a genre also loved by Jackson's idol, Fred Astaire), they also both draw on the 1953 Hollywood musical *The Band Wagon* and specifically, in their iconography and narratives, its film-noir-style 'Girl Hunt' finale.

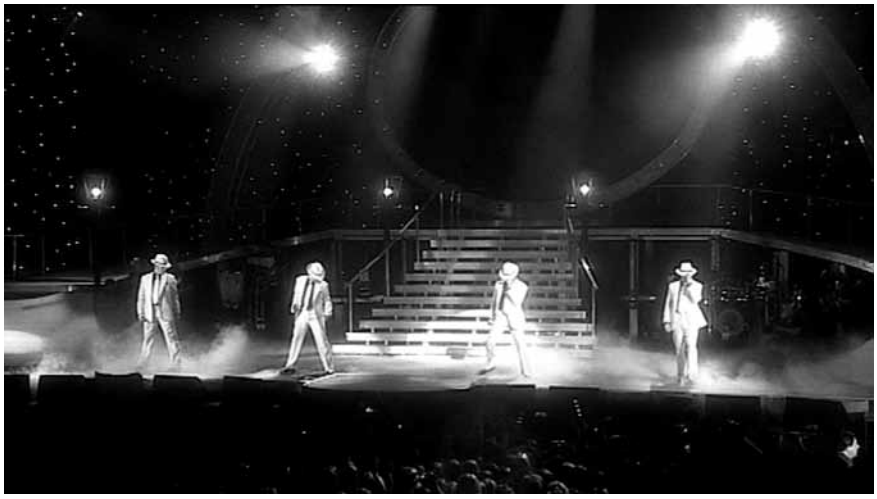

Figure 5.1 Westlife in *Turnaround*

hearings: at the first of these Jackson had pleaded not guilty and been granted bail; at the second it had been confirmed the case would go to full trial. It was yet to be seen how Jackson, his creative output, reputation and popularity would fare. But despite this, Jackson's artistic legacy, like Hollywood's banal use of the literal mask in 'novelty' numbers in its musicals, was for Westlife apparently already long enough dead to be paid tribute.

But 'tribute' was exactly what Jackson did not get for despite the show's heavy sourcing of his moves and iconography credit was never given but in fact rather the reverse. As one review crowed in *OK! Magazine* (later quoted in the

Figure 5.2 Michael Jackson's 'Smooth Criminal'

inlay of the show's DVD): 'The new fab four – This was a big test for the Irish chart toppers – would the old magic still be there? The answer a resounding yes.

Fans were swept away by Westlife's unique stage presence.'[11] The irony in the last statement of this comment is astounding as there is barely anything 'unique' at all in *Turnaround*, evident in all its glory in the opening sequence that is not the creativity of Westlife or even their production team but of Michael Jackson. This glowing review of Westlife, and its absence of any mention of Jackson, was typical: another account vaguely glossed the show's sets (the syntheses of 'Singin' in the Rain' and 'Smooth Criminal') as Westlife's 'high concept set designs'.[12] By using without credit Jackson's style and iconography to create *Turnaround*'s most memorable moments, a process reflected in its reviews, Westlife, and their reviewers, were repeating the process at the heart of minstrelsy and its continuum in the Hollywood musical: the whitefaced appropriation of blackness yet its simultaneous marginalization through denial.[13]

A year after *Turnaround*, and shortly after Jackson's courtroom dramas had finally concluded in his acquittal, stories emerged of the discredited singer and Westlife teaming up to record a single. While the Jackson camp did not comment, Westlife had lots to say and in an interview with the British newspaper *The Daily Mail* confirmed there was a strong possibility and expressed excitement. Yet even at this late stage, in a curious elision the group failed to acknowledge Jackson's creative influence on the high-profile tour that they had only just finished: 'It would be [a] cool thing to do', lead singer Shane Filan commented regarding the prospect of working with the King of Pop, 'we are all big fans of Michael Jackson'.[14] As with many other news publications across Britain, *The Daily Mail* reported the story on its website and invited readers to comment. Many Westlife

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[11] Unattributed quote in inlay to Westlife, *The Turnaround Tour: Live from the Globe, Stockholm*, 2004 (DVD, BMG, 82876660179).

[12] 'Westlife – Turnaround Tour DVD', at http://www.video-c.co.uk/radarwatch.asp?vidref=west004&text=expanded&playback=S&player=QT [accessed 11 February 2006].

[13] As Hazel Carby has explored, this same process of white appropriation yet denial of Jackson's creativity was at play in the case of *Lord and the Dance*, the white American Michael Flatley's Celtic dance extravaganza produced after his departure from the much-celebrated *Riverdance* company. Sold by Flatley as 'all new and all Irish' and despite Flatley's broader denial that the dancing and choreography owed anything to any other dance form, *Lord of the Dance* owed much to Michael Jackson. As Carby details, Flatley's performance included the moonwalk and other dance moves and choreography belonging to Jackson's 'Bad' video of 1987. It also drew on Jackson's 'version of mass spectatorship and adoration', specific expressions of masculine power and showmanship (as glorified in the introduction to the King of Pop's *HIStory* video greatest hits). In her conclusion, Carby describes the result as a 'racial fiction, as Celticness' and the perfect cultural product 'of the segregation of 20th-century American urban life'. Hazel V. Carby, 'What is This "Black" in Irish Popular Culture?', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4/3 (2001): 325-49, at pp. 337, 339 and 341.

[14] 'Westlife and Jacko Team Up for Duet', at http://wwwdailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/showbiz/showbiznews.html?in_article_id=376019&in_page_id=1773 [accessed 24 December 2006].

fans did, among them one who typically scoffed: 'Michael Jackson will need Westlife before they need him.'[15]

Turnaround's musicians and pop culture *Verneinung*

Despite some mean lead guitar solos in the first few numbers of *Turnaround*, the band that accompanies Westlife remains largely disembodied until some twenty minutes into the show. Shunted stage left and largely out of view, the band is both visibly and physically marginalized. For the spectator at home the only notable exception to this is the tenor sax player whose profile the camera frames for a moment during the show's third song, 'What Makes a Man'. The other musicians, including lead guitarist and drummer, are not framed until the close of the opening Jackson section after Westlife has left the stage to 'World of Our Own' and the band plays a refrain of the song. It is only from this delayed point onwards that the band becomes slightly more visible and it is revealed that, with the exception of the sax player, all of its members are black. The centrality yet suppression of blackness through the use yet non-credit of Jackson in the production and reception of *Turnaround* is a process, it would appear, also at work in the show's treatment of its musicians. This is particularly obvious in the show's second segment, for which Westlife perch on stools to sing a selection of slower and more intimate numbers. This section is unique in that one of the black band members is brought front and centre: the keyboardist, now dressed in black coat-tails, plays a grand piano and has been wheeled centre stage to join Westlife. But characteristic of the show's broader treatment of blackness, this centrality is, in a way and at the same time, denied.

The section opens with an introduction by Nicky Byrne, the first discursive performance of any length thus far. The pianist is positioned among Westlife (who sit in a row-cum-semicircle) and full-frontal to stage left so that he has his back to two of Westlife (Kian and Mark) and half the live audience. The direction in which the pianist looks – which, when not attending to his hands, is directly offstage – is particularly obvious for the DVD viewer at home. This outward-looking gaze, at least partly the result of the pianist's positioning, renders him not convincingly involved in the performance. Furthermore, the pianist is never framed face on, rather the camera routinely privileges his back, and even pans out from it at one point in the smoochy ballad 'Flying Without Wings'. In addition there are occasional close-up shots of the player's hands on the piano keys.[16] This visual and positional marginalization of the pianist climaxes during 'Flying Without Wings'. In this number the camera gives its sole shot from the back of the stage so that it is looking out to the filled arena. In the foreground, onstage, the back of each

[15] Anon. (Comments), 'Westlife and Jacko'.

[16] This focus on the pianist's back and hands reflects the treatment of black men in traditional minstrelsy: the assignment 'as body' and the frequent dispersal into body parts.

Westlife member is visible but the long sheer curtains that hang as their backdrop fall so that they mask the piano and its player and render both entirely invisible. This treatment is very different to that which the only white musician receives in the same segment: in 'Swear It Again' the band's white saxophonist moves forward to perform an improvisatory, glizzando-rich solo, standing for his big moment up on the raised proscenium drowned in spotlight. In the case of the sax player, blackness is being at once showcased, on an instrument and by a musical aesthetic originating in the black vernacular of jazz, and left in the shadows; the same treatment to which Jackson, and the pianist, are subjected.

In her engaging study of *Singin' in the Rain*'s non-credited appropriation of black dance – 'the art of unseen others' – Clover draws on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical *Verneinung* (meaning literally 'negation'): the paradoxical process, in an act of the uncovering of the unconscious, whereby the effort to forget calls up the very memories it means to put down. In Freud's writing of this phenomenon in *Studies of Hysteria* he explains: 'The deeper we go the more difficult it becomes for the emerging memories to be recognised, till near the nucleus we come upon memories which the patient disavows even in reproducing them.'[17] Of most relevance here, this 'forgetting' might be repudiation, while the memories might be identities, ideas, sources or atavism (resemblance to a remote ancestry). Clover applies this process to *Singin' in the Rain* and specifically the way in which the film, and not least the famous Kelly number, seems bent on suppressing the black body. For, as Clover documents, despite this suppression the film curiously features two fleeting moments of black representation. The first of these is the moment when the comic musician 'Cosmo' (Donald O'Connor) imitates Al Jolson's classic performance of 'Mammy' from *The Jazz Singer*, down on one knee, arms out-stretched in the pose Jolson made famous. The second moment is in the set of another movie in production at the studios of *The Dancing Cavalier*, *Singin' in the Rain*'s own film (the 'show in the show' in the typical format of the movie musical) in which black 'savage' figures, acted by white actors 'blacked up', dance a primitive dance. As Clover goes on to explain, what is striking about these moments is that the movie's plot does not rely on either of them. While some references to *The Jazz Singer* may be justifiable, and logical, in a movie set in 1927 about the filmic shift to sound (*The Jazz Singer* is the new cinematic competition), the others are less so, if not wholly ornamental. For Clover, these moments represent instances of pop culture *Verneinung*: the bringing to white consciousness of black suppression, past and present, in the instance of its repudiation. As Clover writes of these scenes (quoting Eric Lott in relation to traditional blackface minstrelsy):

> It is the very gratuitousness of these references that demands our attention. Actually, they are not *gratuitous* at all, at least not in the root sense of that word

[17] Sigmund Freud, quoted in Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), p. 262.

> (*gratis*, free). Rather, they are moral payoffs in an economy in which 'there are fame and money to be made.' They are the 'memories' that surface in the process of 'forgetting', as though, in a perverse bargain, they must be admitted *in order* to be overridden.[18]

Returning to *Turnaround* with this in mind, is it not equally curious that Westlife's musicians are black? After all, Westlife epitomize the white boy band phenomenon, each of them symbolizing an ideal of Nordic beauty and collectively proving most popular among young white British and European girls (the audience in *Turnaround*'s DVD confirms this). This veritable blackness the band brings to an otherwise white show (made all the whiter in the super-blonde capital of Stockholm) seems so unnecessary to the 'plot'; 'so uncalled for', as Clover puts it for the corresponding moments in *Singin' in the Rain*.[19] When the keyboardist is apparently brought centre stage he seems especially ill-fitting as he sits at the polished grand, now with coat-tails over his t-shirt and retaining a straight poise as he plays. The image Westlife, or their creative team, seem to be after here is rather that of the European concert pianist. Perhaps as an unconscious means to legitimate their black cultural repudiation that is Jackson's artistry (or as symptomatic of it), at the very last minute Westlife think to connect with real black performers in the form of session musicians. The black musicians raise up the show's 'structuring absence', as Clover calls it, at the point of its submergence, at the point of denial of Jackson as defining creative force.[20]

Love and theft

Clover's approach to *Singin' in the Rain* and its relationship with blackness is captivating and works well to explain the treatment of Jackson – the racial politics at play – in Westlife's *Turnaround*. But while indeed, with the demise of the literal mask, minstrelsy developed into the non-credited appropriation of blackness – what Lott refers to, in the context of traditional minstrelsy, as 'theft' – historically minstrelsy has been a form in which this appropriation has rarely been so unequivocal. This is the argument typical of the 'second generation' of scholars of minstrelsy, and of Lott and W.T. Lhamon in particular, with the introduction of the various forms of desire that especially fuelled early blackface performance.[21] This is what Lott terms 'love' in 'love and theft' – his theoretical

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18 Clover, 'Dancin' in the Rain', p. 743.

19 Ibid., p. 737.

20 Ibid., p. 740, n. 32. Ultimately, however, this works only to foreground the show's very whiteness.

21 Along with minstrelsy's 'first generation' of historiography, Chapter 1 explores the trend for the argument of desire in the 'second generation' that developed out of a

paradigm of minstrelsy's mixed investment.[22] Given the semantic complexity of *Turnaround*'s tradition, encapsulated by Lott's theory of dialectics, *Turnaround* probably warrants a re-read, for the clear resolution of its meanings as theft would not be in the spirit of minstrelsy. This multivalency generated by the desire for the culture that is plundered also points us to what the theory of ungrateful theft has hitherto left unexplained in *Turnaround*: the respect for and obvious appeal of Jackson as a dancer and icon of style.

Turnaround opens with the sounding of a klaxon horn at which point an introductory bass riff begins, then each Westlife member enters Jackson-style. Once all the boys have made their entries, Kian, fingers to mouth, wolf-whistles the rest of his group and their band into the opening number, 'Turnaround'. While the immediate simulation of Jackson's dancing body posits the performance by Westlife in the tradition of blackface minstrelsy, so too, though less obviously, does Kian's whistle: a key blackface gesture according to Lhamon in his account of the tradition. In a speculative though persuasive argument, Lhamon documents a sequence of scenes, starting with blackface minstrelsy's 'proto-performers' of the early 1820s and closing with *The Jazz Singer* in 1927 in which the whistle has recurred. The minstrel whistle is what he refers to as the 'wolf-whistle subfamily'.[23]

The minstrel whistle for Lhamon made its first appearance in the early 1820s when slaves sold their dances to white workers across America's northern ports and dock areas: the first formulation of blackface minstrelsy. A favourite among those who performed at Catherine Market in the Five Points District of New York, as Lhamon documents, was the black Long Islander Bob Rowley. Known as 'Bobolink Bob' in performance, Rowley identified himself with the American field bird, the bobolink, whose male's brown face and under-parts characteristically turn black during breeding. A key feature of Bobolink Bob's act, for which whites were so eager to pay, was his whistle: 'his specific imitation of furtive field birds putting on blackface to breed'.[24] As Lhamon presents it, Bobolink Bob's whistle auralized this early practice of minstrelsy, not yet crystallized into the racist practice it was to become by the mid-1840s. A birdsong in its natural state used to attract a mate and mark out territory; the whistle of Bobolink Bob and others like him made its practitioners heard, and attractive, in a space otherwise controlled by others.[25] As Lhamon argues, blackface minstrelsy in this early era was essentially fuelled by the *desire* for blackness. It was about an eagerness to combine, share

dissatisfaction with the tradition's earlier more univocal interpretations of black cultural theft.

22 Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 6.

23 Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 111.

24 Ibid., p. 92.

25 Ibid. One might consider the minstrel whistle as a prime exemplar of the Lacanian 'object voice' that, in its non-use of the larynx, is always outside any symbolic system, kind of 'thrown out' of the body by its subject, who can never own it. It is a vocal object and specifically one of desire. See Mladen Dolar, 'The Object Voice', in Renata Salecl and

and overlap the difference that was to be later caricatured on the professional stage in the classic minstrel show. Working-class white men paid up to a third of a day's wages to watch slaves dance out the gestures of self-representation to which they had become drawn. Much of this interest, as the evidence would suggest, had to do with a cross-racial identification that worked successfully to consolidate an underclass alliance.

Lhamon goes on to document the re-emergences of Bobolink Bob's whistle through the history of blackface minstrelsy. Among them is that which featured on the classic minstrel stage of the mid-1840s, by which time white entertainers were routinely stylizing and lampooning the gestures Bobolink Bob had first danced. In particular, Lhamon draws on Billy Whitlock and his caricatures of blackness. Billy Whitlock, as with other performers like him, continued to include the minstrel whistle but by this time it had mutated into the imitation of a locomotive's whistle as part of a thematic fascination in minstrelsy for steam power. In an 1843 performance in London, Whitlock offered a 'locomotive lecture on de machinery ob de globe' in which he gave an imitation of a locomotive in operation together with 'steam-whistle' accompaniment. But by now, according to Lhamon, the minstrel whistle had come to signify something quite different from what it had in Bobolink Bob's day. Drawn away from its role as expressing cross-racial attraction and identification and wrenched into a new theatrical context, the whistle had turned from a signal of alliance to the signal of difference. The minstrel whistle had become part of a joke that assumed it was ridiculous for blacks to describe the world's mechanisms.[26]

After other articulations at various junctures in the continuum of minstrelsy (including in American literature and popular music), the final reiteration of Bobolink Bob's whistle comes for Lhamon in the first sound movie, *The Jazz Singer*.[27] As Lhamon details, the whistle appears in the Coffee Dan's scene, the first of the film in which the newly Americanized Jewish 'Jack Robin' (formerly 'Jakie Rabinowitz') appears, played by Jolson. A budding vaudeville entertainer eager to make his name, Robin gets up on stage and sings, accompanied by piano, to the other patrons at Coffee Dan's. Among the numbers he sings is 'Toot, Toot, Tootsie', written by Gus Kahn in 1921. As Robin performs it, 'Toot, Toot, Tootsie' picks up the minstrel whistle in two ways: by the appropriation of the steam engine imagery of classic minstrelsy, its whistle now a 'toot'; and, quite elaborately, by the improvised whistle solo in the song's third chorus ('stretching' out what

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Slavoj Žižek (eds), *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 7-31.

[26] Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 93.

[27] Leading up to this point in Lhamon's account the minstrel whistle reappears in nineteenth-century American fiction (in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Martin Delany's *Blake* (1859–61)) as well as in the blues (in Jelly Roll Morton's 'Sidewalk Blues' of 1926, which opens with the interruption of the minstrel whistle by a klaxon horn, the very same sonic juxtaposition that features in the opening to *Turnaround*).

had 'generally shrunk to a talisman').[28] First taught to whistle with thumb and forefinger by Al Reeves (the white blackface minstrel famous for risqué banjo comedy acts during the 1890s), Jolson continued to deploy the aural gesture as a performative hallmark long after *The Jazz Singer*.

As Lhamon's theory goes, it was Bobolink Bob's attractive imitation of furtive field birds that was minstrelsy's first calling and its meanings remained embedded in the whistle's later mutation into a call used to lampoon. In discussion of the whistle's transformation from the vernacular gesture of desire to the parodic call of a steam train, Lhamon writes: 'The mechanical whistle does not erase or replace the earlier whistle. The trains' action is to compound and overlay and *pull along* the earlier signs even as the locomotive whistle may erroneously seem to replace them.'[29] Applying Lhamon's thesis to the Coffee Dan's scene in *The Jazz Singer*, Robin's whistle is therefore not merely the calling up of a racially divisive entertainment form (that was at the time still pervasive in vaudeville) but also the calling up of a former working-class culture, for which that same entertainment and its gestures had signified cross-racial desire and alliance among 'polarized' identities. This theory is endorsed by Lhamon in considering how Jolson practised and played with blackface minstrelsy more broadly. As Lhamon suggests, the application of the mask by Jolson was a mechanism by which to negotiate his own compounded identity as Jewish American: Lhamon notes how in some performances of 'Toot, Toot, Tootsie' through his career, Jolson frequently expanded the song's lyrics at the end, replacing the standard 'Goodbye Tootsie, goodbye', with the question, 'What-am-I, Tootsie? What am I?' While this amendment does not feature in *The Jazz Singer*'s version of the song, its question nevertheless runs more broadly through the narrative of the movie.[30]

For Lhamon, the whistle has long been a feature of blackface minstrelsy, from its vernacular presentation to the professional theatre, through American fiction and mass film, 'retained and referenced', he writes, 'even as late as Al Jolson's performance in *The Jazz Singer* (1927)'.[31] However, almost a century later, Bobolink Bob's whistle sounds again in Westlife's *Turnaround*, used as an aural signal to open the boy band's show. Given the analysis thus far of *Turnaround*'s relationship with blackness – in which a cycle of appropriation, marginalization and *Verneinung* is at play – one might argue that Kian's whistle signals another 'necessary' remembering, a subconscious auralization of black performance, at the point of forgetting. But surely this denies the multivalency of the minstrel whistle for which Lhamon argues, and the multivalency of minstrelsy generally. If Whitlock's steam train's whistle carried with it the early folk gesture of Catherine Market, and Jolson's whistle embodied at once the codes of Whitlock's divided

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28 Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 112.

29 Ibid., p. 92.

30 Ibid., p. 114. In *Blackface, White Noise* Michael Rogin similarly argues that for Jolson the mask was a mode by which to work out his own identity.

31 Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 4.

culture *and* Bobolink Bob's cross-racial one, surely this means Westlife's whistle has the ability to hold these different meanings together too. By this, Kian's whistle is a call symptomatic of the denial of blackness *and* for its wilful interpenetration. Furthermore, if the white workers for whom Bobolink Bob danced, and later Jolson, deployed blackface as an agency of a cross-racial attraction and compounded identity respectively, could this not be done again by others?

Irish and black American alliance

During minstrelsy's classic years, it was not so much the black fraternity who were the subject of lampoon but rather the antebellum lumpenproletariat as a whole. Immigrants from Ireland, Germany and France – as threatening as black slaves in their supposed difference and similarly seen as unfit to be equal citizens – were ridiculed in the minstrel show. During the late 1820s and mid-1840s two vast waves of Irish immigrants swept northern cities and New York in particular. With this, native white Americans began to increasingly equate Irish immigrants with blacks. This was evident in rural slang in which the Irish were commonly referred to as 'smoked Irishmen', 'white Negroes' or the 'niggers of Europe'. Like black people, the difference of the Irish literally ran through their veins. As Matthew Frye Jacobson writes: 'a discernable racial chasm separated the Celt from the Anglo-Saxon … physical differences marked an inner, natural "difference" separating the two races undeniably'.[32] This equation of the black and Irish in the popular mind was reflected in minstrelsy as skits and songs routinely portrayed Irish immigrants in terms identical to blacks. In this mutual subjection to ridicule and social subordination, a cross-racial underclass allegiance was formed between the Irish and blacks.[33] Furthermore, the two groups shared another affinity through their mutual compounded identities as American and Other.

Despite their strong affinities, however, there was at times much hostility between the Irish and blacks. This ambivalent relationship was illustrated well during the 1830s: at this time Irish immigrants identified particularly strongly with blacks, yet exercised extreme hostility towards them in a series of race riots, such as those in Boston and Philadelphia. Irish workers did not univocally appreciate their resemblance to blacks and typically voted pro-slavery in their resistance. Irish immigrants at times used the harsh degradation of blacks to their own ends as a means of self-aggrandizement in a social assignment of powerlessness and to

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[32] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 49.

[33] Indeed, the former slave Frederick Douglass once remarked that the only songs that he believed came close to the pathos of slave songs were those he had heard in Ireland during the famine of 1845–46. Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 95. Ronald Radano states that the first recordings of black musicians in America actually 'sounded more "Irish" than "black"'. Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, p. 5.

consolidate their own Americanness.[34] In New York, in the third year of the Civil War, the Irish dealt blacks significant death and destruction.

But despite this complex relationship, black and Irish Americans together formed an underclass and, whether they liked it or not, others equated them through the blackface mask. By the same agency, blacks and Irish lampooned their social superiors, mediated relations and critiqued their mutual subordination. One might wonder if this historical affinity across the Atlantic, and especially under the mask, affects how we might be able to read the Irish Westlife's play with blackface minstrelsy today. After all, as with other diasporic identities, the Irish have been marginalized people and the subject of lampoon on both sides of the Atlantic, while at the same time providing a wealth of cultural expression, especially music and dance.[35] *Turnaround*'s moves and whistle might be less markers of the appropriation and marginalization of Jackson than tokens of a historical alliance with him. By this, Westlife's *Turnaround* might well be read as turning things around.

The trope of the blackface turn

In *Turnaround* Westlife's non-credited appropriation of black cultural gestures, that is the dance moves and iconography of Jackson, along with the whistle, quite evidently posits the show in the continuum of blackface minstrelsy. But this performative tradition is also curiously alluded to by the show's title, *Turnaround*, and its opening number of the same name, for the 'turn around' has long been blackface minstrelsy's most prevalent trope. Among the boy band's fans (the show's audience) and in the tour's surrounding discourse, the title '*Turnaround*' was understood as the start of the four remaining band members' new life post-Bryan McFadden, who had just left the group. But this meaning could never have been the case, for when Westlife gave their press conference on 9 March 2004 confirming Bryan's sudden departure, the group had only twenty days before their opening show in Belfast. At this late stage every detail of the tour would have been in place.

The phrase 'blackface turn' appeared for the first time in 1911 in *Monarchs of Minstrelsy, from 'Daddy' Rice to Date*, by Edward LeRoy Rice, the first full-scale study of blackface minstrelsy. In this early era the 'blackface turn' was used to reference the general practice of blackface minstrelsy and derived from the characteristic spins of slaves that 'Daddy' (T.D.) Rice had brought to the professional stage. These spins became the 'weels' of Jim Crow, the song and the dance, all of which entailed 'turning around'. Like the minstrel whistle, the turn

[34] According to Rogin, Jewish immigrants, including Al Jolson, did much the same thing in the period 1890-1930. See Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, passim.

[35] Tap, the conflation of the Irish jig and black vernacular, brings to life this Irish and black mutuality.

has returned at various points in the continuum of blackface minstrelsy: as we have seen, it literally defines Kelly's 'Singin' in the Rain' dance and among the most spellbinding of Michael Jackson's moves, from his first performance as a solo artist ('Billie Jean' for NBC's *Motown 25* in 1983) to his later ones (in 'Black or White' and *Ghosts*), was his sublime spin.

As well as acknowledging the literal meaning of the 'turn' in blackface performance, Lhamon also applies it as an epistemological model to the tradition. This is done in two key ways (both of which take cues from Lott's 'love and theft' formula): in the tradition's 'lore cycle' (the conceptual tool by which he presents the continuity and evolution of the tradition) and in his nuanced approach to the form's semantic complexity. The first aspect of this model – the blackface lore cycle – is made up of historical segments, allowing for both the tradition's over-arching commonality (the white appropriation of black cultural gestures and its simultaneous black marginalization) and its semantic change over time. Lhamon terms the lore's segments 'turns', for the semantics they embody are always on the move, turning, 'rounding bends' in their promise, across varying historical moments, of solving the problems that collectively they disclose. As Lhamon goes on, these 'bends' are never at once entirely new nor the same: the early Jim Crow played by T.D. Rice and George Washington Dixon was not the late Jim Crow of the classic minstrel show, nor the still later Jim Crow at the heart of rock 'n' roll (the pop musical phenomenon that Lhamon argues worked to break down rather than consolidate racial division).[36] Lhamon argues that through these various junctures represented by Rice, Emmett and Presley, Jim Crow turned from being symbolic of cross-racial desire to symbolize racial disdain, only then to turn back to symbolize the original desire for which he had first been the figurehead. Comparing the classic minstrel show with rock 'n' roll, Lhamon writes: 'The two turns went in opposite directions. The early turn hardened white attitudes towards blacks and enforced gross racist stereotypes. The second was still animated by the same images and worked the same forms. But it released a liberatory sympathy that contributed to the Civil Rights movement.'[37] Here, Lhamon foregrounds the blackface lore cycle's key characteristic: the oscillation over time from desire (love) to disdain (theft), the constant turnings and re-turnings of resistance and its discipline. And this is typical of the various trajectories of such lore that, as Lhamon explains, 'are what keep social contests open and at odds. The trajectory of lore cycles presents the way cultures (do not) solve problems.'[38]

So to explain the second aspect of his 'blackface turn' model, Lhamon draws on Thomas F. De Voe's *The Market Book* (1862). In this account of early blackface performance, De Voe, like Lhamon, describes the slaves who danced for white workers at New York's Catherine Market in exchange for eels. De Voe writes of the

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[36] For the discussion of rock 'n' roll and the role of Elvis Presley in the continuum of minstrelsy, see Chapter 3.

[37] Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, pp. 80-81.

[38] Ibid., p. 78.

ritual: 'some of them [the dancing slaves] did more in "turning around and shying off" from the designated spot than keeping to the regular "shake-down," which caused them all to be confined to a "board," (or shingle, as they called it,) and not allowed off it'.[39] As Lhamon explores, De Voe seems to read the slaves' 'turning around' at such moments as a reluctance to perform, which led to their enforced confinement. But Lhamon is not so sure and suggests that the dancers may not have been necessarily showing a reluctance to perform but rather the intention to take their acts away; to either 'spin off' to other patrons or turn inward to reserve the gestures for which their onlookers thought they had paid.[40] Lhamon problematizes De Voe's depiction of the slaves' dancing further by drawing on Roger Abrahams's studies of 'market performance' up and down the Americas ('The Winking Gods of the Market Place').[41] Specifically, Lhamon refers to Abrahams's reading of the shingle: the raised wooden board on which these slaves danced. As Lhamon notes, the shingle was, according to Abrahams, not merely the slaves' designated place but their *preference*. Furthermore, onlookers and patrons often held the board down and kept time by patting juba so that they were jiving with these men, not necessarily controlling them. This being the case, the slaves' 'turning around and shying off' was not so much the sign of a reluctance to perform, as De Voe would have it, than a means to entice white involvement. By turning, these dancers were asking their patrons to 'attend me more closely, Hey, push and pull with me'.[42] Lhamon reveals how the earliest 'blackface turns' and their apparent meaning could be turned inside out to be subverted: Lhamon and Abrahams turn the tables on what De Voe believed he saw. This illustrates the complex semantics of blackface acts not only over or across varying historical moments (with which

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39 Thomas F. De Voe, quoted in Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 9.

40 Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 9.

41 Ibid., pp. 3 and 9.

42 Ibid., p. 12. This 'turning around and shying off' about which De Voe and later Abrahams and Lhamon write is visualized in *Turnaround* by the pianist when he is wheeled centre stage. As already noted, he almost exclusively looks away and out of the performance, 'shying off' from Westlife and the camera crew. In the song 'Swear It Again' at the close of the sax solo, Kian claps overhead in appreciation and the others bow their heads. The camera pans back from the sax player and it does this from the wings stage left. The profiles of Westlife, sitting in line, come into view. Now in the frame, between the sax soloist and Westlife, is the pianist and a view that promises the first (and only) full frontal shot of him, as he has hitherto looked only in this direction. But this is denied when, apparently for the first and only time, the man at the piano turns away from the direction of stage left, and so too the camera, out of the frame and into the arena. This 'shying' away is the same in the following shot of him, again from stage left, and for the full-stage pan from the front that comes next, the pianist having turned back in the direction of stage left (to where the camera had previously been) so that he continues to avert its gaze. While this is a striking visualization of the 'shying' away of the dancing slaves at Catherine Market, unlike them, however, the pianist is not in control of his location or space, or of how he is represented filmically.

the turning segments of the lore cycle deal) but also simultaneously in one 'turn'. This complexity between desire and disdain, alliance and division rears itself time and time again through the stories of blackface minstrelsy, the documentation of the whistle being one such example. This continual expression of oppositional forces is the essence of Lott's formula 'love and theft'.

Conclusions

In a fashion very similar to that of the Hollywood movie musical, Westlife's *Turnaround* sees black cultural theft based on a process of appropriation (Jackson's dance and iconography), marginalization (Jackson's non-credit) and *Verneinung* (the black band who emerge at the point of Jackson's 'forgetting'). However, to remain true to its blackface lineage, it is inadequate to leave *Turnaround* there, for minstrelsy has seen historical expressions of not just 'theft' but also 'love'. Undeniably, much has happened since the golden years of the Hollywood movie musical with regard to blackness and its relationship to whiteness – blackness is now far more thoroughly assimilated into mainstream culture and less definable as different. Furthermore, given the semantic complexity of blackface acts, it is far more likely that Westlife's turn is not quite so unequivocal.

Westlife took dance moves and iconography belonging to Jackson in a wholly ungrateful way. However, amid this, signs of 'love' may be found, indicated by Kian's wolf-whistle (the re-projection of the minstrel whistle), the show's title and the historical affinities between the Irish and blacks. Kian's whistle is after all the most bold and public declaration of the attraction for an Other. Westlife could be seen to be concerned rather with the deconstruction of the blackface mask, calling implicitly for the interpenetration of this charismatic stuff in white culture. And indeed, despite their non-credit, Westlife must be deeply attracted to Jackson's dancing body – its twists and its turns – trying on the accent of his blackness to create a charismatic performance of their 'own'.[43] Blackface acts, such as *Turnaround*, are not merely a mass of semantic stuff but the expression of a semantic world distinctly contradictory, its parts – love and theft – always grinding together. For as Lhamon writes of the workings of lore: 'we must not mistake the segments of this cycle … to be either separate from each other or complete. Rather, the parts turn together and they cycle on.'[44]

So where does this leave *Turnaround*'s 'unseen other' and the main subject of study, Michael Jackson? Arguments can be made for both love and theft in *Turnaround*. But what can be certain is how, in either of these scenarios, Westlife use Jackson to their own ends. This is a process central to blackface minstrelsy and

[43] The white male fascination and attraction for the black male body itself has historically been central to blackface minstrelsy. Chapter 7 explores this and more specifically homoeroticism in minstrelsy.

[44] Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 76.

about the only thread that binds the tradition's opposing parts. And this is why all this matters. It is Jackson's cultural language that provides the creative highlight of, and climax to, Westlife's show and, however one chooses to read it, this was used consciously as its selling point because one big attraction was that 'fame and money were to be made'. What ultimately speaks loudest, and drowns the boldest wolf-whistle, is the show's very real expropriation of Jackson's creativity. And the trick worked: as reviews and accounts of the time suggested, *Turnaround* was Westlife's best show to date. Contrary to what was the popular belief in the months following *Turnaround*, with the prospect of the two artists joining forces to record a single, Westlife *did* need Michael Jackson. And likely long before Jackson might have ever needed them.

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Chapter 6
Just Using It: Eminem, the Mask and a Fight for Authenticity

This chapter explores the continuum of blackface minstrelsy embodied by Eminem and more specifically in his relationship with Michael Jackson. White, American and raised in the suburbs of Detroit, Eminem is the most commercially successful hip hop artist to date having achieved global acclaim through the appropriation of gangsta rap – a musical genre largely derived from black culture and concerns.[1] In 'Without Me' from the 2002 album *The Eminem Show* Eminem shows himself to be fully aware of the controversial performative tradition in which he has found himself: in the track Eminem compares himself to Elvis Presley as a 'king of controversy' in his 'selfish' use of black music to get himself 'wealthy'. But what Eminem under-represents in 'Without Me' is the attraction black cultural expression has undoubtedly had and his alliance with the 'community': hip hop spoke to Eminem, growing up poor and white, and, as he made sure in return, he spoke to it.

This chapter analyses Eminem's 2004 single 'Just Lose It' and its accompanying video. 'Just Lose It' represents a contemporary manifestation of minstrelsy as a white version of hip hop but also in its parody of, among other well-known artists, two black men: MC Hammer and Michael Jackson. In keeping with the harshest white portrayals of black men in traditional minstrelsy, this is done in a particularly disparaging manner with regard to the latter. Despite Eminem's longstanding respect for and allegiance to the 'community' (and in contrast to Westlife in *Turnaround* whose worst crime against Jackson is cultural theft), Eminem in 'Just Lose It' expresses clear disdain for Jackson to reveal the contradictions and disparities inherent in minstrelsy. But as the analysis of 'Just Lose It' goes on, a whole host of other conventions belonging to blackface performance are unravelled in both song and video, and ultimately in Eminem's relationship with Jackson. True to traditional blackface minstrelsy, and despite his strong black alliance, Eminem turns the mask to his own ends, deploying Jackson to meet his own self-serving needs.

'Just Lose It'

Ahead of the release of Eminem's *Encore* in 2004, the album's most lightweight track 'Just Lose It' was released as a single. 'Just Lose It' came as bit of a surprise

[1] See Chapter 3 for the development of hip hop.

in that it was a catchy and accessible rap with an elaborate video showcasing high production values somewhat out of kilter with both Eminem and gangsta rap.[2] However, despite all this, and rather more in keeping with its artist, 'Just Lose It' successfully excited controversy on its release for its disparaging depiction of Michael Jackson. At the time of production of 'Just Lose It' the world had witnessed the King of Pop's handcuffed arrest and release on bail for a new set of child molestation allegations. Jackson was a hot topic and in the irreverent context of hip hop (in which 'dissing' and political incorrectness have been conventions since its earliest days) the singer's misfortune offered the perfect material for Eminem. Dressed in fedora, red glitter top and single glove, Eminem masquerades as Jackson, who appears at various points and in different scenes throughout the rap's video beset with a collection of misfortunes: his hair catching fire, his fake nose dropping off and, under the surveillance of CCTV, sitting on a bed with young boys. As well as the video's bedroom scene and some other moments, the song's lyrics (in the opening verse) also make specific reference to the charges of child sex abuse that were being made at the time.

A week after 'Just Lose It' was released, Jackson spoke out of his objections to 'Just Lose It' on the grounds of both personal sensitivity and race: 'I am very angry at Eminem's depiction of me in his video', he told Los Angeles radio station KKBT-FM host Steve Harvey on the black comedian's morning show. 'I've admired Eminem as an artist, and was shocked by this. The video was inappropriate and disrespectful to me, my children, my family, and the community at large.'[3] In a subsequent interview with newsman Geraldo Rivera, Jackson extended his attack to all US cable channels and specifically MTV bosses for continuing to air the video. Rivera backed Jackson, calling Eminem's parody 'lazy racism' and Harvey responded with the honorary gesture of revoking Eminem's ghetto pass (meaning he who had formerly been embraced in the 'community' was now no longer welcome): 'Eminem has lost his ghetto pass. We want the pass back.'[4] Fierce criticism also came from the urban magazine *The Source*, whose president and CEO Raymond 'Benzino' Scott demanded not only that the video be pulled but also that the song be taken off the album and a public apology from Eminem be made to Jackson.[5]

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[2] Starting in earnest in the latter half of the 1980s, rap videos have more traditionally visualized the hip hop style and addressed its genre's more serious political concerns by focusing on the local neighbourhood, the rapper and his posse or crew.

[3] Eric Olsen, 'MJ Asks Cable to "Just Lose It"', at http://blogcritics.org/video/article/mj-asks-cable-to-just-lose/ [accessed 4 June 2006].

[4] Latisha Simmons, 'Steve Harvey Revokes Eminem's "Ghetto Pass", Video Pulled from BET', at http://www.allhiphop.com/2004/10/12/steve-harvey-revokes-eminems-ghetto-pass-video-pulled-from-bet/ [accessed 24 April 2012].

[5] Two years later, however – when Benzino was fired after unfavourable articles on Eminem and his protégé 50 Cent had led to a loss in sales and support from advertisers

In response to Jackson's request, Black Entertainment TV (BET) pulled the 'Just Lose It' video from rotation, a spokesman for the network explaining that this was out of respect for their longstanding relationship with the singer.[6] The channel's president, Robert Johnson, meanwhile, said he felt it was inappropriate disparagement. Despite BET's decision, however, no other cable channel followed suit. This included MTV which, despite having been largely bolstered in its fledgling years by Jackson's pioneering music videos, did not feel it owed him the gesture. In fact, 'Just Lose It' went on to become one of MTV's most requested videos. After widespread objections to their decision were made, BET's censorship did not last either.

The parody of Jackson in 'Just Lose It' came as part of a trend of Eminem's of poking fun at other artists: Christina Aguilera, Fred Durst, moby and Marilyn Manson having been among previous subjects and MC Hammer, Madonna and children's TV character Pee Wee Herman being others in 'Just Lose It'.[7] Many considered the objections to 'Just Lose It' to be as ridiculous as the spoofing spirit of the video itself: 'The bottom line is … if you are as famous, rich and flat-out fucking weird as Michael Jackson, you are fair game for parody', one journalist scoffed.[8] Eminem himself rebuked Jackson's charge that he had crossed the line and when promoting *Encore* denied seeing that there was a problem:

> I've struck some kind of chord with [Jackson] and I'm not sure exactly what it was … that I didn't strike in Madonna or MC Hammer or Pee Wee Herman or myself, all of which I made fun of and spoofed [in the video]. I like Michael Jackson, I like him a lot. I'm just happy that Michael Jackson has heard of me.[9]

– it came to light that this opinion was Benzino's, as part of a personal vendetta against Eminem, rather than that of the urban magazine as a whole.

[6] 'Jackson Asks Stations to Stop Airing Eminem Video', at http://www.mtve.com/article.php?ArticleId=5040 [accessed 1 January 2006].

[7] Neither was it the first time the rapper had spoofed Jackson: the previous year Eminem had made fun of the infamous baby-dangling incident in Berlin in 2002 when Jackson had held his newborn, 'Blanket', over the railings of a hotel balcony at the request of screaming fans. On a visit to Scotland the following year, Eminem came out onto a hotel balcony wearing a black and white tracksuit and surgical mask to throw a baby doll in the air.

[8] Olsen, 'MJ Asks Cable to "Just Lose It"'.

[9] 'Eminem Labelled Racist by Michael Jackson', at http://www.femalefirst.co.uk/entertainment/12342004.htm [accessed 1 June 2006]. Despite Eminem's dismissals of Jackson's response he had had experience of being at the receiving end of spoof, and he hadn't liked it. The previous year Eminem had enforced the halting of Weird Al' Yankovic's video production of 'Couch Potato' (from the album *Poodle Hat*) fearing the video, which parodies his *8 Mile* song 'Lose Yourself', would be detrimental. 'The irony of this situation with Michael is not lost on me', Yankovic told the *Chicago Sun-Times* on the matter of 'Just Lose It'. Mike Thomas, 'Is the King of Pop Losing It?', at http://www.suntimes.com/output/entertainment/cst-ftr-jacko14.html [accessed 16 October 2004].

And indeed, despite there being some supporters of Jackson on the matter of 'Just Lose It', the general consensus was that the video was harmless, and that Jackson couldn't see the funny side: 'Michael – humorless bastard that he is – is not amused.'[10]

Eminem the artist

Before more closely analysing 'Just Lose It' and the conventions of minstrelsy that underpin the song and its video, it is relevant to contextualize the track in Eminem's career and creative trajectory. Eminem, aka Marshall Mathers, found international fame in 1998 after signing to Aftermath, the record label owned by Dr Dre, former member of Niggaz With Attitude (the group that had initially led the way in the development of gangsta rap). Heavily influenced by Dr Dre's funk sound, Eminem's debut album *The Slim Shady LP* became one of the most popular albums of 1999 and won Eminem a Grammy award for best rap album. The sales of his follow-up album, *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000), broke all records in hip hop's history, including the fastest selling hip hop album (the record formerly held by Snoop Dog for *Doggy Style*). The same year saw the establishment of Eminem's own record label, Shady Records, and Eminem receive Grammy awards for all three rap categories: best rap solo performance, best rap performance and best rap album for *The Marshall Mathers LP*.

In these early albums, Eminem pursued hardcore hip hop tropes of violence, misogyny and homophobia articulated through coarse language and ghetto slang formulated into slick, energetic lyrical satire. Consequently, along with the acclaim came attacks from critics regarding, among other features, Eminem's choice of subject matter: *The Slim Shady LP* saw criticism for its track '97 Bonnie and Clyde', which describes the trip taken by Eminem with his infant daughter to dispose of his wife's dead body, and for the track 'Guilty Conscious', which closes with the encouragement of another man to murder his wife and her lover. The same album received harsh criticism for its graphic depictions of violent murder in 'Kim' and murder and suicide (of a deranged fan and his pregnant girlfriend) in 'Stan'. In the years that followed Eminem continued to come under fire from every which way, from the gay community (for his songs' frequent homophobic content), to women's groups (for his misogyny) and politicians (after allegations in 2004 that Eminem had threatened the US President).

By the time of the release of his third album, *The Eminem Show*, in 2002, Eminem's self-representation of hardcore gangsta rap artist, however, had begun to alter, the album typically featuring some anger and coarse language but being generally less inflammatory. The same year also saw the box-office hit *8 Mile*, the semi-autobiographical movie in which Eminem stars as the lead character, Jimmy 'B. Rabbit' Smith Jr, and for the soundtrack of which he recorded several songs,

[10] Olsen, 'MJ Asks Cable to "Just Lose It"'.

including 'Lose Yourself'. At the time, the movie was particularly notable in its presentation of a somewhat softer Eminem and as part of this a new acceptance on his part of homosexuality. Eminem continued to move more mainstream and by the release in 2004 of *Encore*, the album from which 'Just Lose It' comes, despite the anti-Bush administration track 'Mosh', Eminem had shed his edginess still further.

Unlike Vanilla Ice and the majority of other commercially successful white rappers, from the very beginning Eminem found credibility among the black community. A key reason for this was undoubtedly Eminem's carefully invoked narrative of the 'hood': the impoverished trailer-park upbringing in Detroit, the drug and alcohol abuse, and the dysfunctional family (including the early abandonment by his father, the truancy that meant he repeated 9th Grade three times and the well-documented dissension over defamation and slander between his mother and former wife, Kim). Together with lyrics expressing the hardcore realities of growing up white and poor, Eminem's autobiographical narrative sent up strong identification and political alignment with black hip hoppers. As Eminem rose to fame and fortune *8 Mile* successfully worked as a reminder of his 'white trash' roots and endorsed his alignment with the blacks of the ghetto. Furthermore, since the beginning Eminem worked closely with Dr Dre and showed him much respect. In 'Say What You Say' from *The Eminem Show*, Eminem expresses his deference to the gangsta rapper: 'Wasn't for him', Eminem raps, 'I wouldn't be [no] shit'. Eminem has also been associated with, among others, black rappers Snoop Dogg (Calvin Broadus) and Ice Cube (O'Shea Jackson), both of whom he toured with in 2001, and 50 Cent (Curtis Jackson), who he co-promoted and later collaborated with. Eminem has also financially and publicly supported the promotion of some upcoming black groups, most notably D12 who signed to his Shady label in 2002.

Masks and masking devices

Although somewhat confounding, the essential theme to 'Just Lose It' as a song is Eminem's call for 'losing it' on the dance floor. With the exception of verse one the narratives of the verses (three in total each split into two parts) hang on this theme, though at times somewhat loosely: verse two moves from Eminem's intentions to party hard to hitting on a girl in a club; verse three moves from Eminem's performance in a rap battle to intoxicated arrest. Verse one, meanwhile, differs in that, until its second half, it is not connected to the song's theme of 'losing it' at all. Instead, it is here, at the song's opening (when one would expect the main narrative to be established), that Jackson provides the subject. The verse mocks Jackson, who becomes the protagonist and who invites children to sit on his lap and offers them toys, and, with a pun on 'rap', alludes to the child sex scandal.

In its lyrical content, and in keeping with its hip hop genre, 'Just Lose It' is highly intertextual. As well as making numerous references to Eminem's own back catalogue (a feature that is addressed in due course), the rap samples

children's TV character Pee Wee Herman's signature laugh, jokes of the cartoon characters Beavis and Butthead and signifies on other artists' songs.[11] The latter form of intertextuality is established in the very title, which alludes to Jackson's 'just beat it' line from the 1983 hit 'Beat It' (one of just two of Jackson's songs to address some of the realities of black street culture). In addition, Eminem snatches MC Hammer's 'Hammer time' catch phrase (which first appeared in Hammer's 1990 single 'U Can't Touch This') and reworks it for the lead into verse one and the lyrical coverage of Jackson: 'Stop! Pajama time' parodies Jackson's fondness for child sleepovers. Also lifted is James Brown's 1965 hit 'Papa's Got a Brand New Bag', which is reworked and also features in verse one to become the 'bag of toys' Jackson uses to entice young boys. Verses two and three rework the lyrics to Craig David's R&B hit single '7 Days' (2000).

At times reflective of the song's text, at other times not, the video is equally intertextual, comprising a number of sets of various scenes that chaotically recur to form a sort of visual collage. These scenes, although intertextual, are largely self-contained but for the controversial parody of Jackson. While confined textually to the first half of verse one and not connected at all to the main theme of the song, Jackson nevertheless reappears throughout the video's numerous and various scene changes, binding and book-ending them to create the most clear visual narrative as a whole.

The video opens with Eminem's re-enactment of Jackson's 'Billie Jean', Jackson's first major music video that remains one of the most iconic of the singer's videos. At the time of its release, in its choreographed hide-and-seek between the singer and a photographer, 'Billie Jean' was notable for its presentation of a new image for Jackson as a solo artist – cool and enigmatic: the video's most recognized moment is when Jackson dances down the sidewalk of a night-time street and paving slabs light up in response to the touch of each step. 'Just Lose It' opens with this very section. Dressed in fedora, sequin top and single glove, Eminem, alone in a city backstreet, parodies Jackson's dance through a clumsy rendition of his moves (including the iconic right hand point skyward with cocked knee pose) while paving slabs light up. From this 'Billie Jean' street 'Jackson' then enters via a side door a jazz-style club where there is a stage with entertainment and small tables around which patrons sit and mingle.[12] On stage we see Pee Wee Herman ride his bike, MC Hammer break some moves and Madonna wheeled in on a bed gyrating (all three of them played by Eminem). The show is called 'The One Man Show' and Jackson takes the stage. But as he dances Jackson moonwalks backwards into Madonna, pushing her into some stage lights to set alight her conical bra and then his own hair. With flames shooting up from his head, in horror

[11] This refers to Henry Louis Gates Jr's interpretive model Signifyin(g) – the aesthetic of the changing same – which is discussed in Chapter 2.

[12] In its jazz imagery this set is strongly reminiscent of *The Jazz Singer*'s Coffee Dan's scene that is discussed, in relation to Al Jolson's performance there of 'Toot, Toot, Tootsie', in Chapter 5.

Jackson flees the stage and the club scene, runs back down the 'Billie Jean' street and into some public restrooms – seedy and dirty and reminiscent of Eminem's *8 Mile* movie. Here, Jackson runs past Eminem playing himself, who is throwing up in one cubicle, and finds refuge in another, where, in an attempt to douse the flames, he sticks his head in the bowl. Before Jackson can leave he meets Eminem at the door where, again, Eminem vomits, this time projectile and all over Jackson.

When Jackson next appears he is not in the 'Billie Jean' street or the jazz club but in a nightclub where patrons dance and drink on a dance floor, not to hip hop but to 'cheesy' pop, and where Eminem also parties (and hits on Paris Hilton and Dr Dre, who make cameo appearances). Although Jackson's fire is now out his fake nose drops off. On his knees, he scrabbles for the prosthesis. But before it can be retrieved, a close-up shot shows it getting squashed by a dancer's stiletto heel. The video then closes with the embattled pop star sitting at the end of his bed with pyjama-clad boys bouncing around him. Instead of a nose he has a gaping, bleeding hole, his hair is bedraggled and still smoulders and he wears the remnants of Eminem's vomit.

While the parody of Jackson provides the video's central theme, its episodes are just that – episodes – repeatedly fractured by a selection of other scenes that periodically appear. Among the most prevalent – and that feature uncharacteristically uninterrupted for the whole of the third verse, its bridge and extension – is a set of shots strongly reminiscent of *8 Mile* (the movie based on Eminem's life and in which he had starred in the leading role one year previously). Somewhat ill-fitting with the comedy, colour and fun around them, these shots are indicated by a subdued hue and comprise various scenes: the grubby restrooms (in which both Eminem and Jackson find themselves with heads in toilet bowls), a hip hop basement club, an urban freeway (down which Eminem runs 'butt naked'), the prison (in which he then finds himself) and some fleeting street shots (the 'Billie Jean' street with Eminem as himself lip-synching, knee bending and hand signing in a more standard hip hop performance). Along with these is a collection of shots that constitutes a more normative pop presentation in a likeness to Justin Timberlake's 'Rock Your Body' (from the 2003 album *Justified*).[13] In these shots Eminem lip-synchs and moves in a way that intertextually connects him to Timberlake's own visual language (itself heavily influenced by hip hop). Meanwhile, Eminem's relationship with the camera, dress-code (sportswear chic) and backdrop (brick-effect disco-lights) recall 'Rock Your Body' directly. Finally, there is a set of shots that sketches the 2003 movie *Bad Santa*: a dark comedy about a Santa, 'Willie Stokes', 'who doesn't care if you're naughty or nice'. Bad Santa is a lonely and embittered alcoholic who, with his side-kick elf, busts shopping mall safes and flirts with kids' moms. Here in 'Just Lose It', the film's shopping-mall grotto scene is recreated with Eminem playing the Bad Santa

[13] Interestingly, 'Rock Your Body' was a track originally intended to feature on Jackson's 2001 album *Invincible* but after its producers, the Neptunes, and Jackson fell out the track was sold to Timberlake.

with red suit and rakish white beard. He is joined by dwarf actor Tony Cox and child star Brett Kelly who play their own roles as Marcus the Elf and the podgy, pre-teen boy (nicknamed 'The Kid') respectively. Bad Santa invites children onto his lap, including 'The Kid', while drinking Jesus Juice – the name given to the intoxicating liquor Jackson was said to have given young boys at sleepovers.

The key thread running through William Mahar's account of antebellum blackface minstrelsy is the mask's capacity not only to allow the performer to imitate black people directly but also to serve a whole host of other functions. As Mahar details, the blackface mask served as a *masking device* not least to shield actors' personal identification with the material they presented (which, as explored, not only perpetuated but also critiqued dominant attitudes towards race and class).[14] The convention of burnt cork long-banished, in 'Just Lose It' Eminem nevertheless picks up various masking devices and these are most notable at the point in the song when Jackson is lampooned lyrically. Both the song and its video's vast intertextuality is central to this, effectively working to separate, to mask, Eminem from the song's most controversial material.

In the first half of the opening verse, the point where Jackson is the topic of the song, Eminem removes himself intertextually lyrically. As noted earlier, in 'Just Lose It' Eminem relies on heavy self-referentiality but here, disproportionate to the rest of the text, are multiple appropriations of others' utterings as opposed his own: Hammer's 'pajama time' of the last line of the introduction's extension, Pee Wee Herman's first maniacal laugh ('Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha') and James Brown's 'brand new bag' all coming in quick succession, and, in the case of Pee Wee Herman and James Brown, one after the other. Meanwhile, in the video at the same point, Eminem similarly detaches himself: with the exception of one brief street shot, this segment is made up entirely of Eminem as other people. With the addition of swifter scenic cuts, so that the scenes flit more chaotically than at any other moment in the video, Eminem is Bad Santa (who raps as Jackson) and the numerous characters in The One Man Show: MC Hammer, Madonna, Pee Wee Herman as well as Jackson. Moreover, while the video is both diegetic and non-diegetic at varying points throughout (that is, the lyrics sometimes do but at other times do not emanate from the visual image) in this same section is the swiftest alternation between diegetic and non-diegetic text. Diegetic and non-diegetic performance oscillate here, the lyrics emanating from a lip-synching Santa – Hammer – Santa, and no one taking responsibility at all for the child molestation line that floats non-diegetically: 'And I don't mean rap as in a new case of child molestation accusation'. Of further note, this line is cut short as its final word is interrupted by Hammer's lip-synched Pee-Wee laugh.

In all these processes – Eminem's role play, selection and speed of scenic cuts and choice as to who says what when or nothing at all – Eminem articulates more than would be normally permissible and allows himself to shun responsibility while at the same time wielding control. The sheer number and diversity of roles

[14] Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, pp. 1, 41, 327 and 330.

Eminem plays vocally and visually confounds Eminem's authorship, which is problematized to the point of negation.[15] Yet as though none of that was enough, the section closes with an open denial when Eminem proceeds quickly to claim none of it is 'a stab at Michael' and blames psycho-rhythmic forces: 'I go a little bit crazy sometimes / I get a little bit out of control with my rhymes'. This denial of Eminem's – a further sort of masking device – extended to offstage: when asked about the meaning of the song and more specifically its video, Eminem described it in distinctly vague terms, from being nothing more than the parody of a bunch of 1980s icons to meaning nothing at all.[16]

A white man in control

True to the tradition of blackface minstrelsy, 'Just Lose It' projects a white man in command and not just of the rap's black musical genre: 'Just Lose It' platforms Eminem's control in various ways and not least through its myriadic show (off) of other people's 'shows' visually and vocally through its intertextuality. Eminem raps other artists' lyrics and takes the liberty of reworking them, a feature that is a convention of hip hop but that is nevertheless strategically deployed here, or so it would seem, to maximize Eminem's control over others. Meanwhile visually,

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[15] What's more, Eminem's authorial voice is not merely his but that of a whole production team and the end result of a whole series of processes, including editorial, to dislocate and confound streams of consciousness. For Michel Foucault this was the 'field of authorship' (and so too semantic quagmire). See Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (New York: Longman, 1988), pp. 196-210.

[16] Eminem has continually deployed masking devices in his multiple personae: Slim Shady, the bad-mouthed and boastful alter ego who 'just don't give a fuck' (and whose name alludes to blackness), Eminem the stage name and Marshall Mathers, the 'authentic' non-persona illustrated on the cover of *The Marshall Mathers LP* and portrayed in *8 Mile*. As Eminem himself once described it: 'Slim Shady is the guy on a song … who is saying the most ridiculous stuff you can think of – stuff you can't even imagine somebody saying. Then there's Eminem, who is conscious of the outcome and this is how he really feels. Then there's Marshall, who goes home at night and is the real person outside of entertainment, who struggles with the fame and dealing with going from where I really came from to now.' Eminem, quoted in 'Eminem: Embattled But Not Embittered', at http://www.mtv.com/bands/e/eminem/news_feature_111704/ [accessed 10 November 2009]. Eminem and Slim Shady both thus function as protective shields Marshall Mathers can hide behind, enabling him to say more than he otherwise would, as well as being able to skirt responsibility for the same. However, Marshall Mathers is never quite Marshall Mathers either. *8 Mile*, the semi-autobiographical movie, was, as Eminem would have it, not intended to be an account of his life but rather a depiction of growing up in Detroit, and while he did apparently play himself that Self was not Mathers but Jimmy 'B. Rabbit' Smith Jr, the construct of Curtis Hanson's production team.

with some mastery, Eminem adopts the identities of others, manipulating their self-representations and, in the process, their audiences' perceptions. In keeping with minstrelsy, these performances in a performance involve the parody of two black men whose bodies Eminem 'puts on' and 'takes off' as he desires (for Jackson, Eminem even succumbs to a literal mask of prosthetic make-up). The ease with which Eminem adopts others' identities is highlighted by the sheer level and intensity of their referentiality. This climaxes in the Jackson segment when, as already noted, Eminem plays never himself but instead Jackson, Pee Wee Herman, Hammer, Madonna and Bad Santa, not only in quick succession but also seemingly spontaneously through the tightly packed interplay of shots. For the moment when Jackson's hair catches fire, we see Eminem as both Jackson and Madonna on stage together through camera trickery. Indeed, Eminem can even put on Madonna with ease, his toned torso with conical bra becoming the scantly-clad muscle-bound Madonna of the 1999 Blond Ambition Tour.

Eminem further wields command through his own extensive referentiality. Through all the other intertexts, this enforces the overarching, framing history that is Eminem's own and within which all others work. This is set up in the song's very introduction: 'Guess who's back? / Back again / Shady's back / Tell a friend', a lyrical segment lifted in its entirety from the introduction to 'Without Me', a track that proclaims the white rapper's invincibility. This also establishes and centralizes Eminem as the rap's master by its reference to his own alter ego Slim Shady. The song's second intertextual reference is again one made to Eminem, this time 'The Real Slim Shady' track from *The Marshall Mathers LP* that features in the extended introduction of 'Just Lose It'. Also sampled is Eminem's 'Superman' track, from *The Eminem Show*, which provides the only sung line of the chorus: 'Girl you know you're my world'. Eminem in 'Just Lose It' also lifts and rewrites lyrics from 'Lose Yourself' and references the rap battle that provides its narrative. By default, therefore, *8 Mile*, for which 'Lose Yourself' was written, is being called forth too.[17] The video to 'Just Lose It' similarly lifts from both song and film, from Eminem's hops, slips and vomiting in the graffitied toilets, to the re-enactment of the movie's rap battle: Eminem as Eminem fighting it out with B. Rabbit, *8 Mile*'s Eminem. Numerous other scenes allude to the movie, including, as already noted, the freeway, the prison and some fleeting street shots.

This ubiquity that centralizes Eminem works to continually remind us that behind all the intertextual spoofs and play of 'Just Lose It' Eminem is master of ceremonies and is always there, not far away, pulling the strings. Even as he spoofs himself, recycling his old songs to make an ironic 'brand new rap' as he calls it,

[17] 'Lose Yourself' sums up the background to Eminem's character in *8 Mile*, B. Rabbit, and, in the first verse in particular, much of the movie's plot: B. Rabbit growing up and his early career in rap, struggling for respect among his black peers in the underground Detroit hip hop scene of 1995. The video that accompanies 'Lose Yourself' features numerous shots of Detroit, including the Ambassador Bridge, as well as a mixture of multiple scenarios from and reminiscent of *8 Mile*, of B. Rabbit's character and Eminem's.

he wields control: he sounds purposely bored perhaps in self-mockery of his own succumbing to formulae for success. This self-mockery can also be seen as being deployed to de-politicize his mockery of others, and not least that of Jackson. This was a strategy at work perhaps when, on trying to be drawn on his derisive treatment of the King of Pop, Eminem replied (as already cited in full): 'I've struck some kind of chord with [Jackson] and I'm not sure exactly what it was … that I didn't strike in … myself.'

The confines of black masculinity

In 'Just Lose It' Eminem parodies two black artists – Jackson and Hammer – both notable for their softer versions of more standard images of black masculinity. At the height of their commercial success (having found huge appeal among white audiences), Hammer and Jackson were both labelled as sell-out. In Hammer's case, this was compounded when his second album *Let's Get It Started* (1988) shifted stylistically away from the standard rap format of its forerunner, *Feel My Power*, towards a more music-dance orientation. Hammer came under fire still further with his third album *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em* (1990) principally due to his increasingly clean-cut image (as well as for the repetitive nature of his lyrics and reliance on other artists' material, although such heavy sampling later became standard practice in rap). Hammer's distinctive dress code led to the production of his own clothing label while his commercial success prompted his appearance in the marketing campaigns for some major companies, including Pepsi, KFC and Toshiba. Both moves further fuelled accusations of sell-out.[18] Long before 'Just Lose It', Hammer had been mocked in the music videos of other hip hop artists, among them 3rd Bass, The DOC DJ Debranz, Ice Cube and even the Oakland-based group Digital Underground (Oakland was where Hammer had grown up).

Over the years, Jackson similarly received much criticism for his 'camping up' of black masculinity. In their interpretations of black urbanity, two videos that particularly fanned the flames were 'Beat It' and 'Bad': in 'Beat It' Jackson portrays an urban youth diffusing a fight between two rival gangs Broadway-style through the power of dance; in 'Bad' he is the 'street-tough cat' in an urban subway dance routine inspired by *Westside Story*. In urban black America some found 'Beat It' patronizing in its suggestion that dance could be the solution to the dangerous realities of the muggings, knife crime and drug addiction that characterized their daily lives (though this had been Afrika Bambaataa's very objective when he conceived the Youth Organization, which went on to herald hip hop).[19] In its portrayal of black hustler gangs, 'Bad' was similarly disregarded by many. With regular close-up frames of Jackson's ever-feminizing and whitening face, and a

[18] Ironically Hammer's biggest detractors – LL Cool J, Run-DMC and Ice Cube – later appeared in TV commercials.

[19] See Chapter 3.

choreography that drew particularly heavily from balletic and musical show-style gestural pools, Jackson in 'Bad' projected an image of black masculinity with which black urban youths failed to identify. Others criticized 'Bad', and Jackson's zip-clad characterization in particular, for being a caricature of the ghetto.[20]

In contrast to Jackson and Hammer, typical black hip hop artists are largely considered representative of a more 'authentic' black masculinity in their toughness, coarse language or concern for life on the street (or all of these). As subordinates historically robbed of power and control (the narrative we see repeated in 'Just Lose It') it is little wonder black men have traditionally responded by affirming their masculinity in this way. This 'way' is what Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien refer to as the 'ghetto hustler' figure: the 'valid response to conditions of racism, poverty and exploitation'.[21] Typical of most, if not all black male hip hop artists, the ghetto hustler in its attempt to reclaim power is, however, and paradoxically, the projection of characteristics long attributed to black men by others: black male aggression and violence are the stuff of age-old stereotypes. In hip hop therefore, there is a vicious circle between the reality of black masculinity and the white racial fantasies about black maleness born from the caricatures of minstrelsy, which still pervade today. In sum, through the realities of racism the cycle has gone full circle: the reconstruction of identity (the 'valid response') meets its essentialist and restrictive counterpart (the mythical representations of minstrelsy).

In their documentation of contemporary images of black maleness, Mercer and Julien explore this cycle of reality and mythical representation, which 'makes the ideological fictions of racism empirically "true"'.[22] Elaborating on this they explain 'there is a struggle over the definition, understanding and construction of meanings around black masculinity within the dominant regime of truth'.[23] To illustrate this Mercer and Julien draw on what they refer to as the 'over-representation' of black male youth in crime statistics. On the one hand, this over-representation is due to a criminal justice system that still does not look kindly on black men because of the pervading stereotype of 'black criminality' (a fiction). But on the other, it is because black men, both in the USA and the UK, tend to be disproportionately involved in illegality, such as violent crimes and drugs, out of 'sheer economic necessity', as they are far more likely to be part of a low income household, to become school drop-outs and be unemployed (the reality).[24] Indeed, such crimes

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[20] This criticism was despite the script of 'Bad' having being inspired by the story of Edmund Perry: the Harlem, prep-school educated black youth shot dead in 1985 by a New York plain-clothed policeman, who purported that the 17 year old had attempted to mug him.

[21] Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, 'Race, Sexual Politics and Black Masculinity: A Dossier', in Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (eds), *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988), pp. 97-164, at p. 114.

[22] Ibid., p. 137.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., p. 114.

are committed not due to a black criminal proclivity but, as Robert Staples has described it, 'in order to satisfy basic needs for food, clothing and shelter'.[25] The ghetto hustler is a stereotype, an ideology, but also, very often, a necessary reality as a survival strategy.

This complexity with 'reality' is at the heart of black identity more broadly, in that it – black – can 'have a point', not in terms of biological description (for genetically there are more differences among races than between them) but in that it indicates a very real, inclusive term of political identification. Forged through the mutual historical narratives of transportation, slavery and colonialism, a collective black subjectivity is a reality of blackness. These unifying experiences of powerlessness and marginalization and the ongoing struggles against them create a sort of essence woven from the narrative of the past for, as Stuart Hall puts it: 'Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories.'[26] This complexity has stimulated much debate in approaches to blackness and the use of it, along with 'black', as a racial term.

Reconciliations of black masculinity and their parody

While 'Just Lose It' riffs on several common Michael Jackson themes, the most relished by Eminem is the singer's ever-diminishing nose (which, in later years, was replaced by a prosthetic that apparently once dropped off while he was performing) and his hair (which, in 1984, caught fire when a magnesium flash bomb went off while he was filming a Pepsi commercial).[27] In everyday critique, Jackson's wet-look curly perm and surgically altered nose were the key features (along with his blanched skin) most symbolic of the singer's 'camping up' of more standard images of black masculinity. They were read routinely as 'deracializing' and 'inauthentic' signs representative of the enslavement to Eurocentric ideals of beauty and a negative black aesthetic.[28] In an exploration of 'post-liberated black hairstyling', Kobena Mercer suggests, from this everyday perspective, that the Pepsi ad incident could have been seen merely as what Jackson had coming to

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[25] Quoted in Julien and Mercer, 'Race, Sexual Politics and Black Masculinity', p. 114.

[26] Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation', *Framework: A Film Journal*, 36 (1989): 68-81, at p. 70.

[27] In his autobiography, *Moonwalk*, Jackson writes of the Pepsi ad incident: 'bombs went off on either side of my head, and the sparks set my hair on fire. I was dancing down this ramp and turning around, spinning, not knowing I was on fire.' Michael Jackson, *Moonwalk* (London: William Heinemann, 1988), p. 236. Jackson suffered third degree burns to his scalp that required surgery, including skin grafts. This also marked the beginning of what would become the singer's life-long addiction to prescription drugs.

[28] See Chapter 2, Part II for further discussion on this everyday understanding of Jackson's self-change.

him, '"punishment" for the profane artificiality of his image: after all, it was the chemicals that caused his hair to catch a fire'.[29]

Rather than endorse this sort of approach to Jackson's self-transformations however, Mercer goes on to question it, still focusing on the issue of his hair. This Mercer does principally through the destruction of the myth about the naturalness (that is, 'authenticity') of traditional black hairstyles such as the Afro, braids and dreadlocks (the last mentioned common in hip hop culture), all generally considered representative of a more positive black self-image. Despite these assumptions, Mercer details how these styles are in fact as artificial as longer, more flowing alternatives such as Jackson's (and of the vast majority of, if not almost all, black women today): while straighter styles require ceramic straighteners, hot combs and chemical relaxers, the Afro, braids and dreadlocks also depend on the 'agency of the hands' to be attained. But it is not only in their literal creation by which Mercer deconstructs the 'natural' myth of such styles, for their common appropriation as a politicized statement does the same. This appropriation has been evident from as early as the white seizure of 'natural' black hair in minstrel representation (the 'woolly' wig was a key attribute in defining black ugliness and, through opposition, white beauty), to the role of the Afro as a symbol of racial pride and opposition to Western hegemony in the Black Power movement of the 1960s. As Mercer explains, with its perceived naturalness, along with its historical attachments to Black Power and Black Pride in particular, the Afro has become increasingly (mis)understood to be the only black hairstyle that can function as political, while alternatives are the symptoms of 'a diseased state of black consciousness'.[30] As Mercer concludes though, this is entirely misguided: 'nobody's hair is ever just natural, but is always shaped and reshaped by social convention and symbolic intervention'.[31]

The complex issues that surround black hairstyling embody what Mercer refers to as the 'nature/culture ambivalence', that is, the epistemological conflict between essentialist and constructionist understandings of identity formation. This is the same conflict, as detailed, at the heart of blackness and black masculinity in particular, evident in the 'ghetto hustler'. Seeing the Afro and dreadlocks as outdated modes of resistance (for in the anti-essentialist discourse of today 'Black is Beautiful' registers as both Caucacentric and Afrocentric positivistic investment), Mercer celebrates the vast diversity of contemporary black hairstyles. For Mercer, these are not the enslavement to white notions of beauty, but themselves counter-hegemonic art forms: such styles as Jackson's are the deconstruction of essentialist, monolithic images of black identity and reflective of their beholders' very African-*American*-ness and self-construction. As Mercer writes, they are

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[29] Kobena Mercer, 'Black Hair/Style Politics', in Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 97-128, at p. 98.

[30] Ibid., p. 97.

[31] Ibid., p. 105.

'syncretic products of New World stylization. Refracting elements from both black and white cultures'.[32] Jackson's hair becomes a symbol not of deracialized sell-out but of opposition to, or at least negotiation with, the essentialist, racialized images imposed on him as a black man in contemporary culture. These images are what standard hip hop versions of black masculinity on the other hand perpetuate.

For Mercer, black hair such as Jackson's represents cultural negotiation – an aesthetic response to a range of broader problems relating to black American identity. Therefore, perhaps other acts of 'deracialization', such as the less easy manipulation of skin tone and physiognomy, could also be understood in such terms. In fact, one could view their very 'less easiness' as making them all the more symbolic, not of crimes against blackness but of the determined transgression of essentialist images and understandings of it. There is certainly no one more symbolic of this than Jackson, whose carefully crafted face and its prosthetic parts may be collectively read as the very visible deconstruction of Caucacentric and Afrocentric assertions of fixed racial difference and the notion that we may be defined by that difference in the way we look. But what made Jackson all the more representative of a *solution* to the problems embodied by black masculinity was that while in its material form eradicating his blackness, Jackson continually indexed it: his choreography that was rooted in the dances slaves performed and whites paid to watch, the significations on minstrel tropes, the vocal and musical characteristics that register with black cultural aesthetics, and the frequent lyrical referencing to and discursive alignment with black struggles.[33] One might see Jackson as having been the perfect solution to the conflictual 'reality' at the heart of blackness and black masculinity in particular (its mythical construction from 'outside' versus its shared history and subjective 'essence'). This is a conflict that the images of black masculinity characteristic of hip hop cannot generally resolve.

Of note, the other black artist Eminem parodies in 'Just Lose It' is MC Hammer, another figure who, like Jackson, could be understood as having not sold out but having in fact negotiated the conflict of 'realities' at the heart of black masculinity. Eminem in 'The One Man Show' disses Hammer through the clumsy rendition of his 'U Can't Touch This' video and as part of this he characteristically lampoons Hammer's 'camping up' of black maleness. Dressed in gold lamé jumpsuit and wearing full make-up and wig, Eminem dances Hammer-style joined by a lycra-clad posse. In particular Eminem parodies the 'running man' move for which Hammer became renowned: the stylization of the backslide, or moonwalk, in which Hammer, and posse, run in place.[34] Like the alterations made to Jackson's nose and hair, Hammer's dance and 'camping up', which similarly transgressed more standard hip hop images, may be read as the attempt to negotiate the problems at the heart of black masculinity. And indeed, while Hammer rejected aggression

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[32] Ibid., p. 115.

[33] For a fuller discussion on Jackson's skilful negotiations with 'blackness', see Chapter 2.

[34] W.T. Lhamon terms this the 'run step'. Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, pp. 220-21.

and violence (Mercer and Julien's 'valid response'), in his dance he expressed a shared history and social positioning; the subjective 'essence' of blackness: for as W.T. Lhamon recognizes, the 'running man' tells a history, and one that 'does not belong to the apparent winners'.[35] As Lhamon documents it, the move was first performed by slaves between the stalls of Catherine Market in New York's poor Five Points District and there it was an important symbol of the dancers' marginalized position in antebellum American society. As Lhamon explains: 'Running in place – but never arriving – is clearly a process that those performers on the cusp between worlds would emphasize. It grows more and more poignant as the cusp stays there and so do the runners.'[36]

While Eminem disses Hammer's dance, he disses Jackson's hair and nose – the features most suggestive of sell-out and 'inauthenticity' in the everyday understanding of each artist. This is how Eminem treats them and in his parody of Jackson (who is reduced to an unfortunate figure worthy only of a laugh) he goes to town. But if we understand Jackson's curly perm hair and diminutive nose and Hammer's foregrounding of a specific dance as signs of the attempt to negotiate the contemporary conflicts and confines relating to black masculinity (which hip hop fails to do), Eminem does more than poke fun: he is essentially deconstructing their deconstructions. In the case of Jackson, not satisfied merely by diffusing these manoeuvres by setting one alight and dismembering the other, Eminem goes further: he dowses Jackson's hair in a toilet pan and has his prosthetic nose squashed flat back into shape (see Figures 6.1 and 6.2). By the video's close, when Jackson is without nose and hair, the gloves are truly off.

A fight for authenticity

Central in attempting to grasp the reasons behind the dissing of Hammer and Jackson's versions of black masculinity in 'Just Lose It' is the song's position in Eminem's career. As already documented, 'Just Lose it' came from *Encore*, an album that appeared quite late on in what would prove to be the height of Eminem's success. *Encore* was less the expression of aggression, murder and misogyny than the exploration of softer subjects, nowhere more evident than in 'Mocking Bird', the track that describes Eminem's sacrifice of time with his daughter at the cost of fame. *Encore* was consequently recognized as Eminem's arrival at a 'comfort zone'.[37] With its catchy rhymes, frippery, synth strings and melodic verses, and a

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[35] Ibid., p. 226. Towards the end of Lhamon's documentation of nineteenth-century blackface performance, he details its dance moves in the performances of contemporary cultural figures, among them MC Hammer.

[36] Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 222.

[37] Shaheem Reid, 'Eminem Album Preview: Has Success Spoiled Shady?', at http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1493558/eminem-album-preview-dizzy-from-success.jhtml [accessed 12 June 2012].

Figure 6.1 ‘Jackson’ dowses the flames on his head in ‘Just Lose It’

Figure 6.2 Jackson’s prosthetic nose gets squashed back into place in ‘Just Lose It’

video with values of showmanship more true to the glitziest of pop, 'Just Lose It' was symbolic of this shift and this found Eminem in a quandary.

Occupying a newly found, rather glamorous comfort zone in the mainstream, what was at stake at the time of 'Just Lose It' for Eminem more so than ever before was his claim to authenticity: his claim to his alliance with the political interests of black hip hop. From the very beginning, Eminem had shown this to be an alliance important to him, his high-profile, trailer-park biography and professional associations with the likes of Dr Dre proving this. As already detailed, in the early years especially Eminem had gone to great lengths to establish his allegiance to the concerns and aspirations of black hip hop and these lengths had worked: in 'Say What You Say', from *The Eminem Show*, Eminem and Dr Dre rap in conversation as equals. As Steve Harvey acknowledged in his reaction to Eminem's parody of Jackson, Eminem had, up to that point at least, indeed successfully earned his 'ghetto pass'.[38]

While showcasing in all its glory Eminem's new mainstream alignment, with its scenes of charade and showbiz standards largely foreign to hip hop, 'Just Lose It' deals with Eminem's need to re-assert his authenticity, which came with his shift. This is done through its ridicule of Hammer and, more comprehensively, Jackson and their supposed crimes against blackness. Using rap's convention of irreverence, various masking devices and popular themes relating to the 'selling out' of both men, Eminem reinforces the authenticity that he had inadvertently put in danger. Eminem derides Hammer and Jackson's 'inauthenticity', their deconstructions, to allow himself a stronger claim to their blackness.[39]

Eminem underpins this claim, meanwhile, with the set of scenes that invoke *8 Mile*, which work to remind the spectator of a more real, 'authentic' Eminem. Despite being somewhat incongruent with the charade they periodically poke through, these scenes are at the song's very core structurally, are characterized by longer cuts and constitute almost one-third of the entire video. The basement club shots, in their conjuring up of the club in *8 Mile*, function best in this regard, projecting a more normative hip hop culture. When Eminem takes to the stage for the rap battle with B. Rabbit, it is more typical of standard rap performance, as well as the more traditional aesthetic of a rap video. The basement, underground literally in its location, invokes a subaltern culture – black, urban, inner-city – operating equally underground against a capitalist hegemonic culture, itself represented by the pop nightclub where Jackson loses his nose. In the basement club there is a distinct increase in black visibility and more 'natural' black looks: the men on stage behind Eminem and B. Rabbit wear dreadlocks and braids. Meanwhile, the graffitied toilets and prison shots serve to remind us of the harsh black realities of poverty, substance abuse and disproportionate incarceration. And indeed, as was almost certainly intended, in the toilet scene, it is Jackson, sequin-clad and in full

[38] Simmons, 'Steve Harvey revokes Eminem's "Ghetto Pass"'.

[39] The appearance of Dr Dre in the video, meanwhile, allows Eminem to do this more easily without being charged with racism.

make-up, who is ill-fitting, not Eminem. Like the white actors of the minstrel show who confirmed their whiteness and superiority through a process of definition through opposition over the bodies of black men, Eminem defines himself by his difference to Jackson. And also true to the process as it originally worked, this was motivated by the white man's own self-consciousness and doubt.[40]

This whole process is allowed in 'Just Lose It' by its dimension of asymmetric power: Eminem is in the position of master; Jackson in that of the slave. This dynamic is the same as that in traditional minstrelsy: as Alexander Saxton has described them, the black caricatures of nineteenth-century minstrelsy were puppets, worked by a white puppet-master, whose hopeless aspirations were manipulated and mocked – literally feasted upon.[41] Characteristic of much of Eminem's work (and no doubt a reason for much of his success) has been his extremity, more often than not in his objectionableness, in the case of 'Just Lose It' exceeding the boundaries of its satirical game. Appropriating familiar material for derision but taking it further than others would dare, 'Just Lose It' creates a newness through transgression but also, and this is what is important here, through power. In its extremity it forces dialogism: even the most resistant spectator is drawn in, cannot help but respond, and response garners credit because controversy sells.

Eminem and his relationship with Jackson may be understood in the context of G.W.F. Hegel's theory of the dialectical production of 'Geist' – spirit, consciousness and, most relevant here, self-consciousness – and in its post-colonial reformulation in particular. For Hegel this production of Geist is through unequal power relations and specifically that between Master and Slave (sometimes translated as Lord and Bondsman). In *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), in narrative form, Hegel describes the encounter of two self-conscious beings who go on to engage in a struggle 'to the death', only avoided when one apparently enslaves to the other. Through this, Hegel details how self-consciousness (and therefore identity and self-understanding) cannot come into being without first the Self's conscious meeting with, and recognizing itself, in relation to an Other through dialectical movement. In the case of the master and slave, the master only comes into being in relation to the slave. As Hegel writes: 'In all this, the unessential consciousness [the slave] is, for the master, the object which embodies the truth of his certainty of himself.'[42] Hence, death must be avoided for the truth of oneself is achieved only if both live. This dialectic may be translated as an external process between two people or an internal process occurring in the mind of one person, in this case Eminem who needs his Other – Jackson – to legitimize, to authenticate his Self.[43]

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[40] For the process of definition through opposition in traditional minstrelsy, see Chapter 2.

[41] Saxton, 'Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology', p. 27.

[42] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie (New York: Dover, 2003), pp. 109-10.

[43] While there is nothing in Hegel's account to suggest he was thinking of the specific case of American slavery (still less that he had a knowledge of blackface minstrelsy), it

Although as the theory develops Hegel brings out the power the slave ironically shares with the master (for the master needs the slave for legitimation of his own privilege), in its translation into a post-colonial context this is revised. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon reaffirms the very real dominance of the white master over black slaves and firmly relocates the locus of power with the master. As Fanon writes of the dialectic in this new context: 'the master differs basically from the master described by Hegel. For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but *work*.'[44] And in 'Just Lose It' this is exactly the case. For through ridicule, Jackson is used – or 'works' – so Eminem gets what he wants: authenticity. Jackson, meanwhile, could not escape the forces and effects of Eminem's riposte.

Conclusions

The legacy of blackface minstrelsy is everywhere to be found in 'Just Lose It', from its white appropriation of rap to its masks and masking devices but, most tellingly, in its lampoon of Jackson, which serves the interests of Eminem. 'Just Lose It' projects a man in command of his own identity, which he 'blacks up', camps up, destabilizes and evades, yet he denies two black men, Jackson one of them, the same luxury. This is a convention at the heart of the minstrel show in which whites played with their whiteness while blacks were forced to be what others wanted them to be. Eminem lampoons Jackson and his deconstructions of standard ideas of black masculinity so he can define himself in opposition, as 'authentic'. It was a cheap trick, perhaps the last in the bag, for a sold-out Eminem but the legerdemain worked. In discussion of BET's decision to pull 'Just Lose It', journalist Eric Olsen concluded: 'Eminem is far blacker than Michael Jackson. The competing loyalties here are disorientating.'[45]

It would seem more than likely that when Eminem once claimed that the 'Just Lose It' video 'meant nothing' he was being disingenuous, his response acting characteristically as a masking device to conceal the real motivations behind the act. The video's production values remain the highest in Eminem's videography to date. The evidence would suggest rather that much was at stake and the video and most specifically its deployment of Jackson meant quite a lot.

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seems hard to believe, given the date of its writing (1807) and the concurrent ferments around abolitionism and the Haiti slave rebellion, that this would not have been in his mind.

[44] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 220, n. 8 (my emphasis).

[45] Olsen, 'MJ Asks Cable to "Just Lose It"'.

Chapter 7
The Burden of Ambiguity

The world of blackface minstrelsy was one in which white actors tried on the bodies not only of black men but also of women. This was enacted through what became known as the transvested male 'wench': a white minstrel actor dressed in black comic drag, which became as common as the slave and dandy. Marjorie Garber has explored the contemporary manifestation of this stage-type in what she refers to as the 'black transvestite figure': a feminized black male image constructed by whites that has haunted representations of and ideas about black Americans since slave narratives, minstrel shows and lynching rituals.[1] But as Garber goes on to argue, in their own deployment, black performers and artists have since successfully translated this mode of ridicule and oppression into an effective medium for empowerment. Among these artists is Michael Jackson who, as is well known, developed from a child star, unnervingly mature in his masculinity and sexuality (singing of love and adult heterosexual relations) into a feminized adult figure with a sexuality difficult to pin down. Indeed, so determined was this trajectory that in his later years Jackson had created a beautifully elaborate version of the black transvestite figure: the crimson lips, the long lashes, the softened, curled hair and the surgically delicatized, porcelain face.

This chapter, however, looks to interrogate Garber's relocation of power in black transvestism in the specific case of Jackson. This is done in the context of the prototype of Garber's transvestic figure: the transvested male 'wench' of blackface minstrelsy. Crucially, and in keeping with the minstrel tradition more broadly, the 'wench' was contradictory and notoriously ambiguous, and subjected to a whole host of different investments. In Jackson's version of transvestism this contradiction and ambiguity was equally defining so that, indeed, he could have been empowered, but certainly not entirely or univocally so. In this, the power of those around Jackson – his audience – is brought forth and the deconstructing effect of this on Jackson's ability to have been wholly empowered as Garber claims he was.

The transvested male 'wench': misogyny, patriarchy and castration anxiety

As much as minstrelsy was a cultural domain where perceptions of black men were acquired and reinforced, so too was it one where ideas about women, both

[1] Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 267-8.

black and white, were learnt. This was done through the tradition's transvested male 'wench', which grew to be a major 'special' in minstrel show programmes: the Virginia Minstrels performed at least one song in full black drag; George Christy, Barney Williams and Dan Gardner – big minstrel names – were all renowned and adored for their depiction of female roles; and later, among others, Francis Leon took the practice to some lavish heights in the burlesque operas of the postbellum years. Minstrels who were willing to cross-dress were among the best paid performers, providing a wealth of dramatic scope and material. Their popularity was immense and they excited audiences perhaps more than any other spectacle: 'this was one "objectionable feature"', Eric Lott writes of the 'wench' in minstrelsy, 'no self-respecting troupe of vulgarians could do without'.[2]

As 'wench' roles began to appear in urban theatrical minstrelsy, fundamental social and familial changes among whites were taking place, particularly in northern American cities. This was chiefly due to the fast-emerging 'family wage economy': the pooling of the earnings of men, woman and children. Furthermore, alongside this new mode of domestic economy was an increase in availability for wage work of women more generally, which offered them new means of autonomy and public visibility.[3] Not only were men having to get used to an increased female presence in the home at this time, they were also having to contend with the rise of campaigns for women's rights and suffrage in particular. Throughout the 1850s in northern cities, agitation for women's rights increased dramatically and men's status as chief breadwinner – thereby traditional patriarchal control – was being seriously challenged. This fast-emerging public woman became the cause of much anxiety among men. More specifically, this new female figure aroused the metaphorical 'castration anxiety' subsequently theorized by psychoanalysts: the loss of the penis (now the 'phallus') as a representational symbol of power.[4] In the context of the changes occurring in traditional familial roles in the mid-nineteenth

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[2] Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 159. Cross-dressing was nothing new to folk culture, nor blackface minstrelsy. In late eighteenth-century Beaujolais male peasants 'blacked up' and cross-dressed to attack surveyors measuring land in preparation for prospective landlords. In addition, at a similar time in Ireland, the 'Whiteboys' dressed in white frocks and 'blacked up' for their own often extreme attempts to restore ancient commons and express other grievances. John Canoe troupes also included at least one member dressed as a woman. For each of these early instances of 'blacked up' cross-dressing, blackness and woman were equated as emblems of popular resistance: conjoined identities with strong unruly resonances in the name of justice for the poor, regardless of race. For blackface transvestism in Beaujolais and Ireland, see Lott, *Love and Theft*, pp. 27-8. For more on the John Canoe inversion tradition, see Chapter 3.

[3] While traditional gender definition was being reformed among northern whites, on the plantations women's work had long been economically important, as feminist historical research on slavery has shown.

[4] As Diana Fuss explains in relation to Jacques Lacan's reading: 'the phallus is not a fantasy, not an object, and most especially not an organ … The phallus is instead a *signifier*, a privileged signifier of the Symbolic order which may point to the penis as the most visible

century, the phallus was troubled for now there was the threat that women, as they grew more socially powerful, could be in possession of it to present a potentially 'castrating' scenario for men.

So to harness this male castration anxiety that emerged with women's changing role, on the minstrel stage women were subjected to misogynistic lampoon and restrictive images so to keep them 'in place'. Through the transvested 'wench' men gave slanderous, often vulgar and patronizing images of women. Typical portrayals included flirtations with beaux, involving much show of leg and pantalettes, and silly utterances, extending to imitations of popping corks, descriptions of excessive greed and stories of hapless love affairs. As well as curious objects of black male desire, on the minstrel stage women were also victims, 'complaining shrews', over-powering figures or 'yaller gals' (the term used for a mulatto of lower cultural life and often prostitution). Such portrayals not only dealt with grown men's castration anxiety, but also ensured the attitudes of young men were moulded by traditional ideas about gender roles.

A song and dance of coquettish flirtation, 'Lucy Long' (1842) was among the first transvested male 'wench' acts in minstrelsy, becoming a staple special and often extravagant finale. Like the Jim Crow figure, Lucy Long saw numerous variations but she was always grotesque with over-sized feet and 'corncob' teeth. As with most 'wenches', Lucy herself did not sing: another blackfaced performer acting her admirer did, but she pantomimed and danced as he sang. A distasteful object of desire, Lucy Long degraded women, as did her black lover, at once also ridiculed for desiring her. Other renowned transvested acts included 'Lucy Neal', a yaller gal victimized by enslavement and early death. Another common character was the 'Gal from the South', whose song went thus:

Ole massa bought a colored gal,
He bought her at the south;
Her hair it curled so very tight
She could not shut her mouth.
Her eyes they were so bery small,
They both ran into one,
And when a fly light in her eye,
Like a June bug in de sun.

Her nose it was so berry long,
It turned up like a squash,
And when she got her dander up
She made me laugh, by gosh;
Old massa had no hooks or nails,
Or nothin' else like that,

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mark of sexual difference but nevertheless cannot be reduced to it.' Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 8.

So on this darkie's nose he used
To hang his coat and hat.

One morning massa goin' away,
He went to git his coat,
But neither hat nor coat was there,
For she had swallowed both;
He took her to a tailor shop,
To have her mouth made small,
The lady took in one long breath,
And swallowed tailor and all.[5]

'Gal from the South' illustrates particularly well the fear of female power: the girl's cavernous mouth (which must be 'made small'), the lampooning imagery of her nose (that body part routinely used in minstrelsy as a metaphor for the phallus and so symbol of power) and the engulfing, vaginal throat (which, swallowing 'tailor and all', finally wreaks revenge on the master).[6]

The 'wench' of minstrelsy diffused female empowerment and assuaged male castration anxiety through degradation but also through 'masculinization'. This process was especially evident in the domineering stage-type that had a bestial look and oversized feet. But more broadly, this was undertaken by the female character's possession of the literal penis: the 'wench' masquerade was traditionally a knowing one and this recovered male authority, for even 'feminization' would not take away these men's masculinity. As Lott writes, drawing on Robert Stoller: 'The attraction of all such representations … [was] not in order to submit but, through the pleasurable response, to take the power back. The "wench" figure, beyond its rather obvious gender insults, salvaged "potency, power, and masculinity from an originally castrating event".'[7] Meanwhile, alongside the 'wench', bold skits and songs flattered masculine egos and exalted such manly behaviour as competitiveness and sexual conquests as in the boastful 'Black Eye'd Susanna'.

But there was another form of castration anxiety for white men, and this was at the hands not of women but of black men, who were equally feared. Minstrelsy's caricatures worked to assuage this fear of racial difference through over-definition by keeping blackness under tight control. To distance themselves and keep their 'respectfulness' and 'civilization' intact, white actors portrayed black men as savage and their sexuality as such in particular. As part of this process the black male body was reduced to a penis. Reformulating Frantz Fanon's famous remark (that in the white imagination 'the negro *is* a penis'), Lott writes of the black savage in minstrelsy: 'Bold swagger, irrepressible desire, sheer bodily display:

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[5] 'Gal from the South' (*Christy and Wood's New Song Book*), quoted in Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 26.

[6] Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 26.

[7] Ibid., p. 161.

in a real sense the minstrel man *was* the penis, that organ returning in a variety of contexts, at times ludicrous, at others rather less so.'[8] But this reduction of the black male body to genitalia had another motivation: as Lott details, such physical dismemberment as the 'Negro as penis' was because white men were reluctant to recognize the black body 'in one piece' for it would mean recognizing that same body's strength and exploitation in slavery, upon which their nation's economy was built. At a time when physical 'manliness' was especially important to white male working-class self-respect, reducing the black male body to sexuality and dispersing it into discrete body parts or organs occluded this recognition of both exploitation and physical strength.[9] Yet while the construction of black male sexuality as all-consuming and the reduction of the black male body to sexual organ eased fear among white men, at the same time these constructions paradoxically stirred up deep anxiety in a dynamic of black–white male rivalry. This was over not just physical strength but also a presumed sexual potency. This powered the need for a scenario of black castration and this was undertaken by the 'wench', which was a double inversion: the 'wench' was a white man masquerading as a black man dressed as a woman. By this, the black transvestite figuratively 'castrated' black men by feminization.

The expression of homosexual relations

While, thus far, transvestism in minstrelsy appears to have been a space of infinite heterosexuality and patriarchy, it has been widely suggested that blackface transvestism was in fact one of distinct sexual ambiguity in which homosexual expression could be explored. Undoubtedly, in its extreme popularity and cultural ubiquity, minstrelsy indeed showcased a very bold and public appreciation for the black male body in which cross-racial identification, including the envy of a supposed unsurpassable potency, lurked. As Lott's thesis in particular goes, this routinely tipped into cross-racial homoerotic fantasy, which was central to the minstrel tradition. Lott writes: 'It was perhaps the good and proper "vulgarity" of veiled homoerotic desire that was the jewel in minstrelsy's crown, ensuring crowded houses night after night; there is reason enough to think so, given the drawing power of blackface "wenches".'[10] For Lott and other commentators, the 'skirt' offered a safe cultural space in which white men could play with deviant sexual desires and lose themselves.

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[8] Ibid., pp. 25-6. Frantz Fanon originally wrote (one hundred years after the height of the minstrel show's popularity): 'one is no longer aware of the Negro but only of a penis; the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He *is* a penis.' Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 170. He goes on: 'The Negro is the incarnation of genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions' (p. 177).

[9] Lott, *Love and Theft*, pp. 117-18.

[10] Ibid., p. 164.

Especially while summoning images of over-powering women, 'wench' songs also verged on the male pornographic through metaphor: in the case of 'Gal from the South', the master's hat on the black girl's nose.[11] 'My Love He is a Sailleur Boy', a favourite song performed by Dan Bryant in drag, similarly includes some obvious male genital obsession, alluded to through flag-staff imagery. The song, in its last verse, also features a veiled reference to public censure of homosexual relations (as Lott notes), if one reads the words as those not of the female protagonist but of the male actor playing her:

> And it's oh for my lover
> I grieve and repine,
> For fear that this young man
> can never be mine.[12]

Meanwhile, the song sheet illustrations of 'wench' songs were equally suggestive of a phallic obsession while depicting the grotesque black female character. The sheet music illustration of one edition of 'Coal Black Rose' (1827) shows how 'wench' iconography, and presumably therefore her skits, was concerned primarily with the playing out of homosexual relations. The man is characterized by a certain stiffness of pose while his banjo, fingerboard tilting upward, is strategically placed near the groin (see Figure 7.1).[13]

Although by the 1880s Francis Leon, who took pride in the realism of his female depictions, would like to boast otherwise, the 'wench' masquerades of the 1840s and 1850s were invariably knowing ones. This was ensured most directly by the curious preservation of and emphasis on certain male insignia: physical size and strength were common themes as were over-sized feet, made all the more 'man-sized' by cumbersome shoes and boots beneath ball gowns and other frocks. As already detailed, this 'masculinization' was used to preserve potency – to assert male authority amid significant shifts in traditional gender roles – but it also provided a means by which 'regular' femininity could be altogether bypassed. A review of one such 'wench' performance, which appeared in the *New York Herald* in 1842, could be read as alluding to such a manoeuvre: 'Such a strapping pair of

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[11] For Lott, this pornographic content was symptomatic of a wider preoccupation with homoeroticism in minstrelsy that reached well beyond its transvestism, as evident in 'Astonishing Nose' in which the black character's nose – 'like an elephant's trunk' – gives 'some most astonishing blows'. 'Astonishing Nose' (1859), quoted in Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 162.

[12] 'My Love He is a Sailleur Boy' (Charles Moreau, *Negro Minstrelsy in New York*, vol. 1, 1891), quoted in Lott, *Love and Theft*, pp. 164-5.

[13] Elsewhere in minstrel iconography is a prominence of coat-tails and other appendages frequently shown hanging between minstrels' legs, or swords or poles placed there (especially during the war years, which allowed for the inclusion of such props).

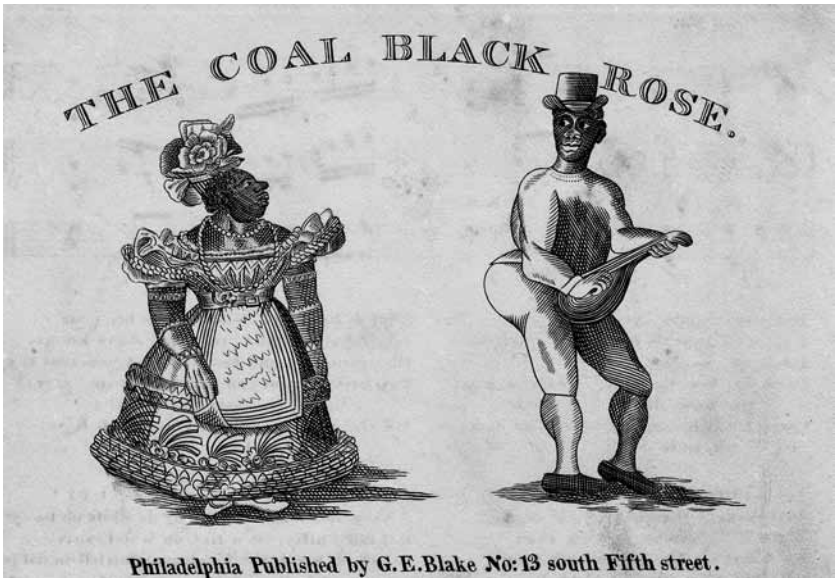

Figure 7.1 The typical 'wench' caricature and phallic suggestions

colored ladies have not been seen for many a day. Fine fun may be expected.'[14] As Dailey Paskman and Sigmund Spaeth document, much of the humour in 'wench' acts came from the suggestion and anticipation of its cross-dressed actor revealing something. But this 'something' was not feminine; it was something distinctly manly. As the couple write: 'The traditional climax of mirth has always come when the simpering "lady" suddenly displayed a pair of huge feet, emerging from dainty skirts, and preferably topped by unmistakably masculine trousers.'[15]

Despite such persuasive readings for homosexual eroticism in minstrelsy's transvestism, William J. Mahar strongly contests its unruly pursuit in his comprehensive account. Rather, any homoerotic content he relates to a more general emergence of an acceptability in the public domain of white male homosexual expression. But even still he suggests this is 'not at all clear from the evidence, however'.[16] Although uncharacteristic of his overarching thesis (that the blackface mask acted as a protective shield to allow deviant social and racial commentary), Mahar's understanding of the 'wench' is literal, concluding: 'For every negative stereotype of an African American male in minstrelsy, there are as many if not more stereotypes of black and white women generated as much by

[14] Anon., quoted in Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 267, n. 47.

[15] Dailey Paskman and Sigmund Spaeth, *'Gentlemen, Be Seated!' A Parade of the Old Time Minstrels* (New York: Doubleday, 1928), p. 91.

[16] Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, p. 326.

misogyny as by racism.'[17] Perhaps it should be of little surprise that the existing approaches to the transvested male 'wench' are not altogether in agreement given its contradictory signs. The best conclusion seems to be that its contradictions, as the evidence would suggest, allowed mixed investment, from its role in warding off the castrating power of women and black men, to its ability to allow the indulgence in same-sex, cross-racial fantasy. The 'wench' meant a whole lot of things and this was allowed by its very ambiguity.

Transvestism after minstrelsy: black self-empowerment

In her extensive study of contemporary forms of transvestism in popular culture, Garber recognizes what she terms as the 'black transvestite figure' to have had a lingering presence relating to black male disempowerment, from the minstrel show to lynching rituals and beyond.[18] Garber notes how this figure has continued to emerge at moments of racial crossing and as part of this goes on to illustrate how, in recent decades, the figure has been deployed by black performers and artists themselves. But rather than imposed or enslaving acts of castration, Garber argues that such black appropriations of transvestism have been used as powerful rhetorical devices for intervention. Through a variety of examples from jazz and rock 'n' roll to Prince, Michael Jackson and popular TV, Garber illustrates how black artists (female as well as male) have deployed the black male feminized figure and used it to their own ends for social commentary, economic achievement and aesthetic power.[19]

In her study, Garber draws on the black American dancer Josephine Baker from the Jazz Age and specifically her much-enjoyed comic performances to white audiences across Europe during the 1920s. In these, Baker played with transvestism and in her first shows with the Revue Nègre (for which she wore ragged clothes and brightly painted lips for 'savage' routines) in a context very much like the traditional minstrel show. Among the most explicit examples of Baker's deployment of transvestism came in *La Folie du Jour* of the Folies Bergère for which she wore nothing but sixteen up-standing bananas strung into a skirt – its fruit famously described as looking, when she danced, 'like perky,

[17] Ibid., p. 268. Mahar claims the images of women characteristic of minstrelsy's transvestism were nothing more than the typical representations disseminated across popular culture more broadly. Mahar writes: 'the most common and apparently successful images of women were those that conformed more or less to what audiences had already come to expect from the presentations of women in magazines, newspapers, self-help books, educational primers, popular theatre and novels, and the often more subtle but nonetheless persuasive world of fashion.' Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, p. 325.

[18] It was common practice in lynching for black men to be hung up on trees and literally emasculated with razor blades.

[19] Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 303.

good-natured phalluses' in 'jiggling motion'.[20] When Baker later appeared with the Ziegfeld Follies, the skirt's sixteen bananas had been replaced with tusks! In her later shows at the Folies Bergère, Baker appeared in white tie and tails, while she could sing quite convincingly as a man. As Garber argues, Baker turned black transvestism round into an act of empowerment in an arena in which women on stage, and especially black women, were either played by men or absent. But in deploying transvestic quotations, at times full gender masquerade, Baker for Garber became much more than an empowered black woman: 'Baker … curiously became … "a phallic symbol," a figure of "compelling potency." Like her banana skirt and its "perky phalluses" her entire body was readable, or misreadable, as a sign of maleness – of black maleness.'[21] By allowing herself to be readable as male, Baker allowed space for the remasculation of the black man, and nowhere more poignantly than when she cavorted the boards wearing sixteen upstanding bananas.

Elsewhere Garber draws on Little Richard in her argument for black male empowerment through transvestism. Known as much for his play with transvestism (and his gay/bisexual lifestyle) as for his contribution to rock 'n' roll, Little Richard indeed quite successfully drew vitality and individuality as a performer from his transvestite markings: the capes and blouse shirts, the glitz and sequins, and the conked, oiled pompadour. With regard to his appropriation of such transvestite elements Little Richard himself once admitted they were deliberately deployed to work as distraction from his race: 'We decided that my image should be crazy and way-out so that the [white, middle-class] adults would think I was harmless.'[22] As Little Richard became one of the most successful black rhythm and blues artists to cross over into the mainstream rock 'n' roll market Garber concludes this worked a treat: 'In general the press was so busy discussing his style that race was to a certain extent relegated to second place among his detractors' concerns, at a time in history in which segregation was still a fact of life in many southern towns.'[23]

While Garber describes Michael Jackson's transvestism – his gradual movement away from his original black maleness – as a key aspect of his 'personal style' and success, she likewise argues that Prince's gendered hybridity worked as the same. Garber draws on Dave Hill, Prince's 1989 biographer, in making her point:

> 'Prince,' writes Dave Hill, 'is a boy who quite likes to be one of the girls.' He 'rearranged himself into a kind of universal hybrid,' with 'a knack of delighting the ladies, by rolling [James] Brown's machismo and [Little] Richard's effeminacy up together, … skittering from one part of the sexual spectrum to the other, with plenty of stops in between.'[24]

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20 Phyllis Rose, quoted in Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 279.

21 Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 281.

22 Little Richard, quoted in Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 302.

23 Garber, *Vested Interests*, pp. 302-3.

24 Dave Hill, quoted in Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 303.

Prince maximized audience identification by appropriating a mode of oppression and he reaped the economic rewards. In the case of Prince, Garber writes: 'Racial stereotyping has here become race-and-gender send-up, controlled by the artist, and deliberately deployed to cross both boundaries and markets.'[25] Similarly with Jackson, transvestism was a means to empowerment, both aesthetic and economic. Jackson was a man who controlled how he was read and seen.[26]

Garber's argument is persuasive yet to what degree such appropriations were 'designed' is surely questionable: Little Richard, for example, simply would not have been able to 'come out' as gay and his stage persona could be understood rather as a safe mode by which he was able to give his homosexuality public expression. But, furthermore, the reception of such play almost certainly would have been, and continues to be, variable. A good example of this comes in the case of Josephine Baker who while she to some degree penetrated the realm of entertainment in European cities remained unaccepted at home. There, many black commentators criticized her for perpetuating age-old minstrel imagery, an elision in Garber's account. In fact, in 1936, when Baker returned to America to star in the Ziegfeld Follies, one reviewer in the *New York Times* scathingly referred to her as a 'Negro wench'.[27] Likely many white audiences saw this too and likely it was this that was the source of their pleasure. Baker's self-empowerment was almost certainly not what everyone saw and enjoyed. A detailed exploration of Jackson's deployment of the black transvestite figure similarly questions Garber's location of power, for rather more in keeping with the minstrel 'wench' Jackson's gendered and sexual crossing was defined only by contradiction and ambiguity.

Jackson: the black transvestite figure

As Garber notes, Jackson did not cross-dress as such but rather deployed the aesthetics of androgyny, and while the androgyne, like the transvestite, projects signs readable as both male and female this located him in the realm of transvestism.[28] But while Garber sees Jackson as a transvestite others have quite routinely read him as a transsexual, with rumours of a sex-change dating back as early as the 1980s.[29] An exemplar of this is Cynthia Fuchs who, in her investigation into the sexual complexities embodied by Jackson, suggests the singer might be understood as having been in the 'wrong body'. In support of her claim, Fuchs gives an account of the reaction of a (male-to-female) transsexual friend to Jackson and specifically

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[25] Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 303.

[26] Ibid., p. 296.

[27] Anon., quoted in Susan Robinson, 'Josephine Baker', at http:///www.gibbsmagazine.com/Josephine%20Baker.htm [accessed 14 October 2010].

[28] Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 295.

[29] It should be noted these two states – transsexual and transvestite – are, to some degree, permeable.

his performance at the 1993 super bowl half-time show. After watching Jackson's performance, Fuchs's friend apparently remarked: 'He's a transsexual'.[30]

In keeping with this reading was the typical response to an incident in 2006 when, while holidaying in St Tropez, Jackson apparently dressed in women's clothes so as to disguise himself from photographers. Jackson's charade was caught on camera by paparazzi and the press revelled in the incident, using it to reignite rumours of a sex change: 'Michael Jackson, the alleged singer, is considering a sex change, reports suggest. That will be to a man, I take it.'[31] In a revised version of her article on Jackson, published in 1995, Fuchs recounts a joke in line with this as well as her friend's reading of Jackson. This she had found in a 'kudzu' comic strip the previous year amid the public discourse surrounding Jackson's surprise and somewhat hasty marriage to Lisa Marie Presley. As Fuchs writes, one character remarked: 'If I heard it once, I heard it a thousand times. That skinny white girl doesn't know what she's doing … And you should hear what they say about Lisa Marie!'[32]

While such approaches to Jackson – from that of Fuchs to public opinion and popular satire – have directly 'transsexualized' the singer, others have done the same though apparently inadvertently. Susan Willis provides one such example of this in an article that contextualizes Jackson, along with blackface minstrelsy, in commodity fetishism. In her account, Willis notes the then-current aesthetic comparison of Jackson and Diana Ross and the idea that his increasing feminization was an effort to approximate Ross's look. But in a curious manoeuvre, Willis then extends Jackson's female resemblance to his musical legacy, when she suggests:

> Rather than defining Michael Jackson in relation to the black male music tradition, I think it makes more sense to evaluate his music with respect to black women singers – and to go much further back than Diana Ross to the great blues singers like 'Ma' Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters.[33]

Although Jackson sounds nothing like Rainey or Smith or Waters, Willis contextualizes Jackson musically in the tradition of black women's blues; she elects to align him with women as opposed to men.[34]

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[30] Fuchs, 'Michael Jackson's Penis', p. 16.

[31] Paul Routledge, 'Michael Jackson', at http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/michael-jackson-645474 [accessed 15 June 2012].

[32] Fuchs, 'Michael Jackson's Penis', p. 15.

[33] Willis, 'I Shop Therefore I Am', p. 186.

[34] Perhaps what Willis is suggesting here is less these artists' vocal sound as their roles in sounding what Peter Antelyes refers to as the 'black maternal voice'. See Peter Antelyes, 'Red Hot Mamas: Bessie Smith, Sophie Tucker, and the Ethnic Maternal Voice in American Popular Song', in Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones (eds), *Embodied Voices: Representing Vocality in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 212-29.

Endorsing the suggestion that Jackson might be readable as a woman was a maternal persona that periodically emerged. In Jackson's countless friendships with pre-pubescent boys (many of them terminally ill, others deprived) this maternal side to him came out. This could be seen to be visualized in what has become the infamous interview with Jackson and Gavin Arvizo (the boy later to be at the centre of the dramatic 2005 child sex trial) that was aired in the 2003 Martin Bashir documentary (in which Jackson publicly admitted he had boys sleep in his bed). The scene of the singer and the boy, which was used in TV news coverage of the story and subsequent trial, sees the twosome on a couch at Jackson's former Neverland home cuddling close and holding hands. As Bashir probes into the nature of their relationship (along with that of Jackson's with young boys more generally), for some time the boy rests his head on Jackson's shoulder. At the time of its original broadcast, and the trial it prompted, the scene was heavily scrutinized by body-language experts to psychologists to evidence the typical relationship between paedophile and victim. Yet an elision in this scrutinization was that the image could be seen to embody the relationship between a mother and doting son. Endorsing this interpretation is Jackson's retort to Bashir's questioning of his sharing his bed with young boys: 'Sharing your bed is the most loving thing you can do.'[35] Indeed, as a letter to *Newsweek* in 1993 asked: 'Would it seem so odd that he slept in the same bed with children if he were a woman?'[36] Jackson's desperation to father children has been well-documented and not least because it was due to this that Debbie Rowe, his dermatology nurse and briefly his wife, bore him two children. In defence of her domestic arrangement with Jackson, in *The Michael Jackson Interview: The Footage You Were Never Meant To See* (Jackson's response to the inflammatory Bashir documentary), Rowe typically explains: 'I didn't *leave* my children; they're with their father, where they are supposed to be.'[37] Here, Rowe speaks of Jackson in terms in which society, including the justice system, usually speaks not of men but of women.

When Jackson first crossed over, breaking into the white mainstream with his brothers in the Jackson Five, the little boy who fronted the group, in his simulations of James Brown, Jackie Wilson and Stevie Wonder, not only belied his age but also, and more specifically, his sexual innocence. In stark opposition to this, and what developed into his typical onstage displays of phallic masculinity as an adult, Jackson off stage increasingly resembled someone quite different. It is here that Fuchs's and others' readings of Jackson as transsexual, as being in the 'wrong body', may be challenged. For this change in identification – from distinctly 'male' to less so – is in fact not characteristic of a male transsexual at

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35 Michael Jackson, in *Living with Michael Jackson: A Tonight Special*, directed and produced by Julie Shaw (Granada Television, 2003), ITV1, 3 February 2003.

36 Anon., quoted in Fuchs, 'Michael Jackson's Penis', p. 13.

37 Debbie Rowe, in *The Michael Jackson Interview: The Footage You Were Never Meant to See*, directed by Brad Lachman, produced by Garry Bormet (Fox Broadcasting/ Brad Lachman Productions, 2003), Sky One, 23 February 2003.

all but, in keeping with Garber's reading, characteristic of a transvestite. As Ethel Person and Lionel Ovesey detail (in their relatively early study of transvestism), despite the clear female identification, the male transvestite quite typically appears masculine, or even hyper-masculine, during childhood.[38] What's more, as Jackson split from his brothers and father and started out as a young adult on a solo career (at which time, as Kobena Mercer identifies, he began to refuse in his lyrics the bellicose model of manliness suggested in the songs of his youth), Jackson found close friendship not only in Diana Ross – his 'first love' – but in a long list of Hollywood actresses including Brooke Shields, Sophia Loren, Liza Minnelli and Elizabeth Taylor.[39] Jackson's long-time fondness for Taylor is particularly well known but as well as fondness it would seem there was also a strong identification: in his 1989 autobiography, *Moonwalk*, with regard to his experience of growing up famous, Jackson compares himself not to Donny Osmond or Stevie Wonder but to Taylor.[40] Elsewhere in *Moonwalk*, on the matter of his changing face, Jackson similarly identifies not with men but with women: 'Judy Garland and Jean Harlow and many others have had their noses done.'[41] This again points to a distinctly transvestic positioning, for, as Person and Ovesey acknowledge: 'The point of transvestic life is to live in a society of women or pseudo-women.'[42]

While public discourse has in the past at least attributed Jackson's feminizing face to the desire to recreate the look of Diana Ross (as well as Elizabeth Taylor

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38 Ethel Person and Lionel Ovesey, 'Transvestism: New Perspectives', *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 6/3 (1978): 301-23, at p. 319.

39 Kobena Mercer, 'Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's *Thriller*', in Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 93-108, at p. 106. Mercer gives as examples 'Billie Jean', in which Jackson denies the kid of an obsessive fan is his, and 'Beat It', in which he sings, 'Don't wanna see no blood, don't be a macho man'.

40 Jackson, *Moonwalk*, pp. 9 and 281.

41 Ibid., p. 229.

42 Person and Ovesey, 'Transvestism', p. 319. This seeking of a life with women brings up the possibility of lesbian or quasi-lesbian or gay male identification and is also symptomatic of the hysteric of psychoanalysis. The hysteric experiences strong identification with the opposite sex, so that the ego is with the mother, while there is a 'problem' with the parent of the same sex who may be absent or rejected (a scenario that resonates with Jackson). The hysterical neuroses are based on secret sexual desires but these desires stand for a situation in which something has 'gone wrong' – the 'normal' course of desire (that is, heterosexuality) has been denied. See Sigmund Freud, 'Some General Remarks on Hysterical Attacks', in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 9 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), pp. 227-34; Richard Middleton, 'Mum's the Word: Men's Singing and Maternal Law', in Richard Middleton, *Musical Belongings: Selected Essays* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 271-92; and Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III 1955-1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (London: Routledge, 1993).

or his sister Janet), others have attributed quite a different motivation, perhaps as his face continued to change. In his 2003 biography, *Michael Jackson: The Magic and the Madness*, Randy Taraborrelli suggests that the reasons behind the feminizing alterations to the singer's face – Jackson's transvestic markings – were rooted not in the desire to be a woman but in his dislike of Joseph, his father. Joseph Jackson was well-known as a disciplinarian who relentlessly rehearsed his kids and commandeered their childhoods. Joseph was known to rehearse with iron cords and belts, and Michael, who bore the brunt of this treatment, was reportedly so frightened at times that merely his father's presence would cause him to regurgitate.[43] Wide, flat noses were a Jackson trait, inherited from Joseph, and Michael's – most significantly flared as a child – was the widest (for which Joseph called him 'Big Nose'). Taraborrelli suggests that the facial alterations were not an attempt to resemble Diana Ross at all, or any other woman for that matter, but rather an effort to minimize his resemblance to his abusive father: 'Michael could not have imagined a worse fate for himself, and he did everything he could do to destroy [it].'[44]

While Jackson's relationship with his father was turbulent he publicly adored his mother, Katherine. In the male instance of transvestism this oedipal identification with the parent of the opposite sex and exclusion of the parent of the same is very typical. In male transvestites, this is quite frequently the response to a disturbed father–son relationship, such as violent interaction during the years of infantile development (which seems to have been the case with Jackson). Transvestism then is deployed and functions thereafter as a form of maternal protection, a reparative and hostile mechanism. As Person and Ovesey explain: 'the clothes represent a defensive posture in the oedipal constellation, originally against the father, later against other males'.[45] Robert Stoller has extended this theory by suggesting that the male transvestite's female clothes also represent the reluctance to give up the mother and the oedipal identification, as well as the rage that manifests – what Stoller identifies as transvestism's central emotion. Here, the clothes become the attempt to undo the separation. As the mother is preserved as a good object, the rage itself meanwhile is directed at the father. This certainly all resonates with Jackson, who idolized his mother, erased his father from both his life and his face, had little time for other men and instead surrounded himself with a host of mother figures. Jackson's diminution and ultimate destruction of his nose is of particular interest here given the feature's quasi-phallic resonances (in minstrelsy it was a metaphor for the black penis, and especially misshapen ones). With this

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[43] Joseph Jackson, however, later retorted (in an interview for which he demanded a $5,000 fee) that Michael 'regurgitated all the way to the bank'. Joseph Jackson, in *Louis, Martin and Michael*, written by Louis Theroux, directed and produced by Will Yapp (BBC Film, 2003), BBC Two, 16 November 2003.

[44] J. Randy Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic and the Madness* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2003), p. 349.

[45] Person and Ovesey, 'Transvestism', pp. 308-9.

in mind, the destruction of Jackson's nose obliterated not only his resemblance to Joseph, but also the symbolic phallus, traditionally located with the father (who is in possession of the real penis) in an aggressive act against it.[46]

Amid the symptoms that many have attributed to Jackson's transsexualism, the aim for Jackson was never to completely erase his phallic maleness, which further positions him as transvestite as opposed to transsexual. While the male transsexual's desire is to eradicate his maleness, the transvestite (like the transvested male 'wench' of traditional minstrelsy) maintains distinct male insignia. This was always evident in Jackson, as Richard Middleton describes:

> The penile focus is foregrounded in Jackson's virtuosic dancing – not just the choreographed crotch-pointing and grabbing, which forms its gestural core, but the dance style as a whole. The pelvic movements, especially the typical forward thrusts; the body spins; the repertoire of leg kicks, bends, and walks, including the celebrated 'moon-walk'; the 'bicycling' side-shot; the X-shaped (crucifixion?) pose and the arm straight up in (self-?) salute: all cohere around a clearly outlined right-angled double axis, in which the vertical and horizontal axes cross at the hip area, dragging the eye to *that place*.[47]

While the penis is the despised body part for the transsexual, it is necessary for the transvestite to 'be'; it is the fetishized self-object of transvestite subjectivity. As Stoller writes: 'One cannot be a male transvestite without knowing, loving and magnificently expanding the importance of one's own phallus.'[48] Jackson has always had a large female following, no doubt much to do with the female attributes he projected and with which they can identify, but also because of those male attributes they find desirable. Of course, it is important not to underplay performativity – Jackson on stage was performing – but the argument here is that his on- and offstage figures cannot ever be entirely dislocated from one another simply because both are so universally recognizable. Moreover, and perhaps most tellingly, it was on stage where Jackson always said he felt most safe and most *at home*.

Jackson's sexuality

'Michael Jackson's penis is a problem', wrote Fuchs in the introduction to her first version of her study of the singer's sexuality. A year later, in a revised version

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[46] The figure of the phallic mother has been particularly important in African-American culture. For more on this, see Richard Middleton, 'Appropriating the Phallus? Female Voices and the Law-of-the-Father', in Richard Middleton, *Voicing the Popular: On the Subjects of Popular Music* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 91-136.

[47] Ibid., p. 129.

[48] Robert J. Stoller, *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (London: Hogarth Press, 1968), p. 188.

of the chapter, Fuchs admits of the observation: 'this opening seems less "cute" or comic than hopelessly understated'.[49] For indeed, in the months between Fuchs's two versions of the chapter the first charges of child molestation against Jackson emerged (in August 1993) and then the following year the marriage to Lisa Marie Presley took the world by surprise. Both before and after this time, Jackson's sexuality was the subject of intense scrutiny and speculation because of such continual conundrums: his bashful teen years spent with girlfriend actresses (Brooke Shields and Tatum O'Neal) yet also with the first young boys and his pet chimpanzee Bubbles, the increasing disparity between an onstage phallic masculinity and his offstage effeminacy, and the charges surrounding his relationships with young boys yet his projection of a maternal figure, ever-attentive to kids, and to his own in his determination to not fail them as his father had him.

From the very beginning, Jackson off stage projected suggestions of asexuality. While in the Jackson Five days his brothers availed themselves of the sexual opportunities being on the road presented, Michael, it seemed, did not follow suit: as a young man he was never 'sexually adventurous' the evidence suggests. Meanwhile, public outings with girls appeared awkward, as displayed at the 1984 Grammy Awards ceremony when Jackson was accompanied by Brooke Shields as well as the 12 year old actor Emmanuel Lewis, the first of his young boys. Taraborrelli writes of the evening: 'Michael held Emmanuel with one arm and hugged Brooke with his free hand. It was as if he was trying to remind Brooke – and maybe the public – that the presence of a child on their date meant that he really wasn't serious about her.'[50] It was around this time that Jackson was also associated with the actress Tatum O'Neal, yet she later remarked: 'I know he's a virgin … I wonder if he's afraid to have sex. He doesn't seem very interested.'[51] Jackson the 'mature' man continued to project elements of 'not seeming very interested' and indeed it seems unlikely that he fathered his three children biologically (they bear no resemblance to their father). After his surprise marriage to Rowe, and less surprising divorce, Jackson was never again associated with a woman. Even now the question remains wide open: did he *ever* do 'it'?[52]

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[49] Fuchs, 'Michael Jackson's Penis', p. 13.

[50] Taraborrelli, *The Magic and the Madness*, p. 293.

[51] Tatum O'Neal, quoted in Taraborrelli, *The Magic and the Madness*, p. 156.

[52] However, in response to questions on the matter of having boys sleep in his bed in the Bashir documentary, Jackson answers not so much asexually as pre-pubescently: 'But when you say "bed", you're thinking sexual. It's not sexual, we're going to sleep … It's very cute.' Michael Jackson, in *Living with Michael Jackson*. The complete removal of anything sexual is symptomatic of the psychological syndrome 'eternal youth', as psychoanalyst Andrew Samuels has described in relation to J.M. Barrie, author of *Peter Pan* and with whom numerous parallels on the matter of boys and boyhood may be drawn with Jackson. *Imagine … Peter Pan: A Hard Act to Follow*, directed and produced by Jill Nicholls (BBC, 2006), BBC One, 17 October 2006. Jackson's more general passivity, social clumsiness,

The public opinion that Jackson had no sex life off stage, while its symptoms remained in evidence, was more latterly displaced by the reading of his sexuality as being not so much absent or regressive, as transgressive, and more specifically homosexual or paedophiliac. Symptomatic of a common conflation of transvestism with homosexuality, Jackson's sexuality has been often read as gay. The first rumours emerged when he was 19 (incidentally the same age at which he had his first nose job) and in 1993 and 2003 they exploded when the charges of child molestation were brought against him. Transvestism and homosexuality are closely entwined, as Garber notes: 'No analysis of "cross-dressing" … can fail to take into account the foundational role of gay identity and gay lifestyle.'[53] In Magnus Hirschfeld's first study of transvestism, however, after research among hundreds of cross-dressers, Hirschfeld evidences how transvestites were at that time at least resistant to being called or thought of as gay – likely because homosexuality (only recently named and 'medicalized') would have been the subject of deep opposition and guilt. Yet Hirschfeld goes on to argue strongly, and more broadly, that transvestism is nevertheless quite distinct from sexual orientation, that it is rather a 'thing in itself'.[54] This is typical of its understanding today and with which Garber is ultimately aligned.[55] Indeed, highlighting their differences, Person and Ovesey continually split the homosexual subject from the transvestite in the male case: their differing childhood gender roles and behaviours (early signs of effeminacy versus an absent effeminacy), their differing adult social circles (a 'world of men' versus the elimination of them) and their differing relationships with their mothers (the usually avoided, engulfing mother versus the 'good object').[56] It therefore becomes plausible, despite public opinion to the contrary, that Jackson was distinctly transvestite but not homosexual.[57]

Yet what of the Jackson on stage – the only place where, he repeatedly acknowledged, he ever felt entirely at home? On stage Jackson fairly consistently performed, as Michael Awkward has described it, the 'confident enactment of male phallic principles': his crotch-grabbing, shirt-ripping and chest-touching,

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victimization and apparent naivety endorsed this positioning: regressive but not so much in a strictly asexual way.

[53] Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 4.

[54] Charlotte Wolff, *Magnus Hirschfeld: A Portrait of a Pioneer in Sexology* (London: Quartet Books, 1986), pp. 107-8.

[55] Garber, *Vested Interests*, pp. 132-3.

[56] Person and Ovesey, 'Transvestism', p. 319.

[57] It seems more likely, however, that there is an intricate network of relations and differences, overlaps and displacements. It is worth noting that Person and Ovesey, 'object relations' theorists, construe the subject–object relationship in a way that is simple and symmetrical and on the level of developmental function, excluding the symbolic place of objects in the economy. One key way in which homosexuality and transvestism are in fact contiguous is in their mutual challenging of traditional gender roles and sexual desire, which in both cases is articulated on the surface of the body.

his common filmic narratives of violence (as in the 'Black or White' panther postlude) and the much-used video footage of fainting, sobbing female fans in response to his stage eroticism.[58] But with regard to the same aspects of Jackson's stage persona and choreography, Fuchs argues these represent not so much the display of male phallic principles as that of a distinctly autoerotic body. For Fuchs, Jackson on stage was rather 'insistently masturbatory' – self-desiring and self-contained – not merely in terms of a collection of gestures but in his self-reflexivity, his continual repetition of performance as perpetual self-imitation.[59] Endorsing this autoeroticism are the women who appear in Jackson's music and videos who tend to replicate him aesthetically: the girl he pursues in the video to 'The Way You Make Me Feel' (1987) (when their profiles are seen in silhouette they are almost identical), Siedah Garrett, who he duets with in 'I Just Can't Stop Loving You' (1987) (their vocal phrases entwine with the same pitch so that they almost sound like one) and Janet Jackson in the video to 'Scream' (1995) (as well as a clear resemblance to her brother, Janet dresses and dances just like him). This sort of 'self-cloning' could also be seen as having been at work in the naming of Jackson's three children (Prince Michael Joseph Jr, Paris Michael Katherine and Prince Michael II ('Blanket')), along with the repetitive alterations to his face; each new version is a copy of itself. Such 'self-enchantment' is also typical of the transvestite.[60]

Yet Julian Vigo (in an article that critiques Margo Jefferson's 2006 account of the singer, *On Michael Jackson*) insists that the one gesture of Jackson's that was never about sexuality was precisely his crotch thrust.[61] To make her point, Vigo draws on Jackson's *Dangerous* World Tour of 1992-93 for which the singer sported his much-recognized unitard-over-pants combination. She recalls how, when she was young, she and her siblings would similarly wear their underclothes on the outside in their attempts to emulate any number of their super heroes. Vigo insists that, in this 'all reference to sexuality was annulled by the neutering of sex organs by the mere absurdity of costume'.[62] In the case of Jackson, Vigo writes:

> This curious mixture of 'inside-out' wear is both costume and play for Michael – the crotch grab becomes an innocent act of desexualization rather than of sexualization … onstage Jackson's body retains a purity of movement and where the thrusts, the twists, his primal screams and high pitched 'heees' are much

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[58] Awkward, '"Slave to the Rhythm"', p. 189. Awkward concludes: 'it seems difficult to sustain an argument that [Jackson's] has not been a demonstratively effective incorporation of sexuality, however cognizant we are of the artifice of spectator response to staged stimuli'. Awkward, '"Slave to the Rhythm"', p. 189.

[59] Fuchs, 'Michael Jackson's Penis', p. 17.

[60] Person and Ovesey, 'Transvestism', p. 317.

[61] Julian Vigo, 'Metaphor of Hybridity: The Body of Michael Jackson', *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 3/7 (2010): 29-41, at p. 34.

[62] Ibid.

> more about being in the presence of this icon and his movements rather than witnessing some sexualized gestures.[63]

Jackson's onstage sexuality becomes as difficult to decipher as that off stage.

Jackson's voice: a search for sex

As Middleton recognizes, the voice is a distinctly 'sexuated territory' yet at the same time an ambiguous one on the same terms due to its performativity: 'singers perform', Middleton writes. 'All performers are, in a particular, codified way, on display, objects of consuming attention.'[64] What is particularly striking about Jackson's voice – what Mercer has identified as being at the heart of his appeal – is its realness.[65] Rooted in the black tradition of soul and, going back further, the whoops and hollers of early African-American aural culture, Jackson's voice speaks directly, it has the capacity to express the extremes of the human condition, not only by its erotic sensuality – its unique texture and rich vibrato – but by its vast repertoire of vocal effects: the cries, squeaks and screams, and its breathy gasps and sighs. This realness is made all the more in the context of Jackson's overall performance, which is consistently invested in the joys of artifice: his filmic themes of bodily transmutations, the high-tech showmanship of his live shows (in the case of the *HIStory* World Tour of 1996-97, a mix of fantasy, futuristic and outer-space themes) and his robotic and repetitive dance that defies the constraints of the human body. All the while, and in contrast, his voice represents something much rawer.[66] For Mercer, Jackson's vocal style 'punctuates the emotional resonance and bodily sensuality of the music', in what he likens to Roland Barthes's 'grain' of the voice: 'the grain is the body in the voice as it sings'.[67]

Given this 'realness' it is perhaps surprising that Jackson's vocal performance, like his body, plays with normative masculine expression, and to such an extent that Middleton insists, 'nowhere does Jackson sound "like a man"'.[68] Middleton goes on:

> There is never, even in the low register, much depth of resonance; the sound comes from the top end of the body … Overall the markers of a 'natural' voice

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63 Ibid.

64 Middleton, 'Appropriating the Phallus?', pp. 92 and 94.

65 Mercer, 'Monster Metaphors', p. 93.

66 However saccharine one might find them, so do his songs, from the calls for social justice in 'Heal the World' and 'Black or White' to the humanist 'Man in the Mirror' (which echoes Gandhi's 'be the change you want to see in the world') and 'Scream' (which attacks the culture of tabloid press).

67 Mercer, 'Monster Metaphors', p. 93.

68 Middleton, 'Appropriating the Phallus?', p. 128.

> are in place (that is, of a 'natural woman'), but they are also classified, insistently, as *un*natural (he is not a woman – is he?).[69]

This reading of Jackson's voice might be seen to correspond with that of Fuchs's with regard to Jackson's body – that, in its violations of masculinity, it was transsexual: 'naturally' a man, but at the same time not. It is undeniable that Jackson's voice is not typically masculine, for the reasons Middleton cites. The feminizing trends in Jackson's voice are most audible in its register, his pitch obviously high. Jackson typically sings in the range from middle C to the D a ninth higher. To contextualize this, a tenor would go well below Jackson's range, still with full-bodied tone. Similarly, a tenor would not sing as high as Jackson does, probably managing around the B flat below his highest D. As for his repertoire of vocables – his high-pitched 'heees' and screams – these extend well beyond the terrain of the tenor or even the alto. As Middleton describes these characteristic vocables, '[they] sometimes shoot up into what, in the context, can only be conceptualized as a female falsetto'.[70] Such screams certainly conjure the conventional sonic markers of female orgasm.[71] But is Jackson's voice really so anti-masculine?

An analysis of Jackson's vocal performance in 'Scream' (the 1995 single and duet with his younger sister Janet taken from the double-disc, greatest hits album *HIStory: Past, Present and Future*) allows for the exploration of this. Musically the song is a mixture of electrorock, new jack swing (typical of much of Jackson's later output), dance-pop and funk. While lyrically the duo decries Michael's treatment by the media during the 1993 child abuse accusations, Armond White expands this: 'Scream' is an attack on what he terms 'contemporary Black slander'.[72] The song is set to an elaborate video (which, at the cost of $7 million, continues to hold the Guinness world record for the most expensive music video to date). Appropriating the aesthetics of Japanese sci-fi Anime (among the most common genre of Japanese motion-picture animation), the video sees Michael and Janet trapped in a spaceship, defying gravity, space and time as they dance their signature moves, which are remarkably alike. For the most part dressed in identical black leather and rubber costumes, neither sibling looks quite real, just like their spaceship surroundings. This visual futuristic fantasy provides strong contrast to both the song's subject matter and its vocal performances, specifically Michael's, which is as raw and, it might be argued, as masculine as it gets.

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69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Armond White, 'Screaming to be Heard, Book I', in Armond White, *Keep Moving: The Michael Jackson Chronicles* (Washington DC: Resistance Works, 2009), pp. 53-62, at p. 59. White goes on: '["Scream"] shouts down fear, defamation, vilification, denigration, lies, smear, traduction, misrepresentation – today's media-world equivalent to segregation, discrimination, hostility, accusation, distrust' (pp. 59-60).

With its close juxtaposition and layering of male and female voices, 'Scream' offers a particularly good vocal performance by which to try and 'sex' Jackson's voice. His vocal range in the song is typical, but not big: the D next to middle C up to the B above it. The obvious exceptions to this are his vocables – some high-pitched 'hos' (singular and double) and upward-soaring 'arrrghs'. Also, a single near-spoken line – 'All this injustice' – is a little lower, somewhere around the G below middle C, made fuller in its body by being close-miked and having a bit of depth added. By comparison, in terms of pitch and range, Janet sings remarkably close: from the G below middle C up to the D a twelfth higher. Yet despite this intertwining range which, at its extremities, in a topsy-turvy way has Michael reaching the highest and Janet the lowest, this is not the effect. This is in part due to the distribution of lines and their make-up; Janet responds to Michael's vocal phrases generally a third higher due to the structure and movement of the melody, rather than to any actual difference in range.

Despite Michael's pitch which, if one wishes to categorize it, is closest to a traditional alto, his voice is remarkably masculine, made all the more so when juxtaposed with Janet's (making the interval between them appear greater). This has nothing to do with pitch, obviously, but rather with Michael's timbre, his 'grain'. While, indeed, there is little resonance to the voice as such, Michael's vocals are characterized by a gravelly, gritty timbre. Michael's delivery is guttural and aggressive and his words are forceful and have purpose. His lines seem to be spat out as if between gritted teeth, an effect heightened by his emphasis of harsh consonant sounds and by a strong rhythmic quality emphasizing the third beat of the bar: 'Tired of in*just*ice / Tired of these *sch*emes'. Michael attacks the song with all he's got.[73]

By contrast, Janet's vocals – by no means weak – are much more 'feminine' (although, at some moments, she does promise an attack with an aggression not much inferior to Michael's). In terms of timbre, Janet's is a particularly clean voice, and her diction is much clearer than her brother's. Her lines are not attacked but rather 'run at', and have some almost lyrical moments, an effect heightened by her slur onto additional quavers at the moments where Michael cuts dead the same phrase. Janet's repeated line 'Makes me wanna scream' of the chorus contrasts strongly to the more punchy, almost staccato, 'Stop *pressur*ing me' of Michael's. Also, this line of Janet's is overlaid with Michael's vocables, which work to fracture the lyricism of her delivery. It is Janet who sings the song's rap interlude. This is sung softly, in a fashion White describes as 'princessy', and it provides an almost uneasy relief from the aggression of the song.[74]

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[73] As White writes, in a culture in which 'no one hears a Black man scream', by this time Michael had 'learned how to voice his anger'. White, 'Screaming to be Heard', pp. 59 and 60.

[74] White, 'Screaming to be Heard', p. 59. At the time of the release of 'Scream' it was noted that in its video Janet took on a darker persona than previously seen in her own music videos, as Jim Farber of the *New York Daily News* wrote: 'Sporting a thick

Despite Michael's unusually high vocal pitch (which his older brother Jermaine also has), Michael's voice nevertheless reflects the male hormone, most significantly through its timbre, inflections and attack. By this, Michael's voice reflects his ambiguous body, which was not so much transsexual as transvestite – transgendered – whereby the aim was to never completely eradicate its maleness. Perhaps the screams of Michael's voice reflect less those of the female orgasm than the transvestite whose central emotion, as Stoller argues, is rage, usually directed at the father. Despite its critique of the media, there is strong evidence for this rage in 'Scream' when the 'somebody' who Michael pleas to take mercy in the final line of the song's bridge transmutes for its repetition into 'Father'. Of note, 'Scream' was released as a double A side with 'Childhood', a song in which Michael laments the youth he lost at the hands of fame but, more specifically, at the hands of Joseph.

Iain Chambers has suggested that the power of soul, the vocal tradition to which Jackson worked most closely, lies not so much in the literal meanings of its words as in the passion of the singer's voice.[75] As already noted, the words Janet sings in 'Scream' are actually far more audible than Michael's yet it is his words that evoke most passion. Rather than characterized by the clear delivery of moving lyrics, Michael's vocal performance is characterized by its texture, its vocables and made-up words, a trend in black vocal performance from Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald to Little Richard and Chuck Berry. It is through this whereby the voice itself becomes the tool for meaning where language retreats. Michael transforms incidents and feelings in his own unusual life into universal processes and emotions: through his voice and its 'grain' we can feel the pain and the passion and turn it into our own. Jackson could have been man or woman, gay or straight or neither or none, but always what we wanted him to be.

So: what gender and which sexuality?

What becomes evident in the study of Jackson's play with transvestism (or transsexualism) are the complexities and contradictions it throws up. This uncertainty exists in a culture in which, as Middleton puts it, 'all subjects, in

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thatch of wig hair, and eyes darkened by coal-black makeup … sullen and arty … Janet … [has] never looked tougher, or more in control.' Jim Farber, 'That Scream You Hear is Jackson's', at http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/news/1995/06/14/1995-06-14_that_scream_you_hear_is_ja.html [accessed 7 November 2008]. However, the cover illustration of 'Scream' suggests something very different and instead in keeping with the duo's vocal performances and how they are sexed. The cover shows Janet and Michael facing one another in silhouetted profile. With mouth open wide, and with furrowed brow, Michael screams, but despite his rage Janet holds an expressionless face suggestive only of passivity.

[75] Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 143.

order to function as subjects, are required – so it seems – to line up under one gender or the other'.[76] Likewise, under one sexuality or an other: reproductive heterosexuality (the norm) or homosexuality (the other). Such fixed binaries fundamentally produce our way of thinking about gender and sexual desire. But as Judith Butler in particular has argued, these binaries are mere socially conditioned fabrications of coherence (like 'black' and 'white') governed by cultural rather than biological imperatives. They are products of the need for explanation and certainty. The cultural obsessions that have been Jackson's gender and sexuality display this cultural need to 'place'. That transvestism is routinely assumed to be the sign of homosexuality does the same, as does the cultural relegation of the 'closet' to homosexual experience (as opposed to the more fluid unknown/private sexual and racial spaces that Eve Sedgwick argues it references).[77]

Assuming the cloaked surface of the sexual Other, yet never completely, and driven by numerous motivations to satisfy varying desires, transvestism undermines absolute binaries around gender and sexuality. Transvestism destabilizes them, defamiliarizing their signs by rendering them reversible, mobile and concurrent as well as conventional rather than innate. As Esther Newton writes in the male instance:

> [Drag] is a double inversion that says, 'appearance is an illusion'. Drag says, 'my "outside" appearance is feminine, but my essence "inside" [the body] is masculine'. At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion: 'my appearance "outside" [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence "inside" myself is feminine.'[78]

Unlike the transsexual, whose aim it is to 'pass', to successfully move from one positionality to the other, the transvestite is far more challenging. As Butler elaborates (typically edging towards her central thesis of performativity): '[Drag] does not assume that there is an original which such [forms of] parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is of the notion *of* an original.'[79]

As detailed, over time and simultaneously, Jackson projected signs readable as variously transvestite and transsexual, male and female, heterosexual, homosexual, asexual and autoerotic. This sort of complexity – showcased in its extreme in Jackson – is why theorists have looked towards a fluid, even nomadic conception of gendered and sexual subjectivity; one that is not fixed in any category but that

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[76] Middleton, 'Appropriating the Phallus?', p. 96.

[77] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closest* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 3.

[78] Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 103.

[79] Judith Butler, 'Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytical Discourse', in Linda J. Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 324-40, at p. 338.

moves with time and circumstance, taking political stands but not permanently so. As Butler writes: 'it is quite possible to understand gendered subjectivity as a history of identifications, parts of which can be brought into play in given contexts and which, precisely because they encode the contingencies of personal history, do not always point back to an internal coherence of any kind'.[80] Jackson's habitual physical transmutations certainly visualized the possibility of such an understanding of gender while his desires seemed to shift and change over time and context, within the tortured apparatus that is constituted by the interplay of the Symbolic and Imaginary:

> The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender; indeed, where none of these dimensions of significant corporeality 'express' or reflect one another.[81]

As part of this revisionist approach to gender and sexual preference, in the context of transvestism Garber looks at the transvestite *as transvestite*, deploying the notion of the 'third': a third state of being between the eithers and ors that are man and woman and heterosexual and gay. For Garber, this third represents a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility where meanings are always in flux.[82] Through the projection of both masculine and feminine signifiers and multivalent sexualities, Jackson may be seen as having been just such a 'third', offering up a space of possibility (while his surgical alterations and skin disease were doing the same in terms of race so that at the same time he was neither black nor white). Deconstructing the formative frame of Symbolic binarism that dictates our understanding of sexuality and gender, Jackson becomes a potentially powerful figure. For as Barthes writes: 'once the alternative is rejected (once the paradigm is blurred) utopia begins: meaning and sex become the object of a free play … liberated from the binary prison [to] achieve a state of infinite expansion'.[83]

Castration and the (re)location of power in Jackson's transvestism

In various respects, it may be concluded that Jackson deployed transvestism, deliberately or unconsciously, as a resistant mechanism resulting in, as identified

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[80] Ibid., p. 331.

[81] Ibid., p. 336.

[82] Garber, *Vested Interests*, pp. 9-13. Interestingly, homosexuals were for a long time described by some theorists as a 'third sex'.

[83] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 133. Steve Perry has also seen Jackson as a utopian 'third' with regard to his negotiations of race. See Chapter 2, Part II.

by Garber, the formation of a utopian 'third'. However, this was routinely not so ideal, for Jackson's deployment of the black transvestite figure did not actually empower him as completely as Garber would have it. For in keeping with one function of the 'wench' in traditional minstrelsy, Jackson – as the black man – was recurrently 'castrated' by others. Evidence of this came at two crucial moments in Jackson's offstage life: when the first and second sets of child molestation charges against him broke out. At both moments, Jackson was subjected to enslaving scenarios of black castration. While the reactions to Jackson's confounding representations of gender and sex have displayed the social need to categorize in these terms, they have also illustrated the traditional power of the black penis in white psychic life, once harnessed by the minstrel 'wench'.

In December 1993, amid the investigations into the first set of child sex claims (made by Jordie Chandler, the son of a Beverly Hills dentist and whom Jackson had befriended), a police warrant was served for the strip search and physical examination of Jackson's body. This was to clarify the credibility of Chandler's description of Jackson's genitalia, which, if correct, would act as strong evidence against the singer. Ordered to stand on a platform and drop his bathrobe, Jackson was pictured and videoed before members of the prosecution team, police and doctors along with his own attorneys, physician and bodyguards. As Taraborrelli tells it in his biography, Jackson ran away from the ordeal crying. Shortly following the incident, Jackson released a four-minute statement from his Neverland home that was broadcast live on CNN and later shown in news bulletins across the world. Jackson attacked the media for 'reaching their own conclusions' then detailed his ordeal:

> I have been forced to submit to a dehumanizing and humiliating examination by the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department and the Los Angeles Police Department earlier this week. They served a search warrant on me which allowed them to view and photograph my body, including my penis, my buttocks, my lower torso, thighs and any other areas they wanted. It was the most humiliating ordeal of my life, one that no person should ever have to suffer. And even after experiencing the indignity of this search, the parties involved were still not satisfied and wanted to take even more pictures. It was a nightmare, a horrifying nightmare.[84]

A horrifying nightmare indeed and one in which a comparison to the examinations of black bodies in slave auctions may be drawn. Jackson was humiliated (publicly, when a detailed report of the examination was leaked) and disempowered: like the traditional savage of black caricature, Jackson was reduced to a body-object yet disrobed of the symbolic phallus.

This process of emasculation was one that recurred ten years later when the second charges of child molestation emerged. Jackson's arrest in June 2003,

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[84] Michael Jackson, quoted in Taraborrelli, *The Magic and the Madness*, pp. 539-40.

for which TV channels across America cut their schedules, was extravagant, including a two-hour police-led motorcade along the Las Vegas strip, a hand-cuffed Jackson being led by police like a common criminal into the Santa Barbara Sheriff's office and a police swoop on Neverland (that apparently required 70 police vehicles). It was hard not to see a modern-day lynching unfold and indeed this was a parallel routinely drawn within Black America: 'I am very angry how they are trying to lynch him [Jackson] before proven guilty in a court.'[85] Indeed, the handling of the case, and in particular the arrest and its news conference (at which prosecutors laughed as they announced the charges being made) ignited a visceral reaction among many high-profile members of the black community. The Civil Rights leader Reverend Jesse Jackson quickly condemned the huge raid on Neverland as 'overkill' and voiced concerns regarding the conduct of prosecutors. Meanwhile, the black activist and commentator Dick Gregory announced across the airwaves of the black community on WOL-AM: 'When they handcuffed him, they handcuffed us all.'[86] Black Entertainment Television (BET), on the day of the arrest, insisted that White America had never forgiven Jackson for becoming so rich (and indulging in such 'anti-social' behaviour as marrying Elvis's daughter): 'try as he may', the article concluded, '[Jackson] could never escape the reality of being black'.[87] Although Garber cites Jackson's sexual complexities – his transvestic qualities – as the key to his success they were central to two public hangings through media and courtroom indictment. The second of these, it would now seem, Jackson never fully recovered from. However hard Jackson's acts of self-empowerment through transvestism are celebrated, these do not fit with the actual traumatic experiences that came to define his life.

While Jackson was emasculated in the two scenarios just detailed, the same process was at work in his latter-day public dismissal: Jackson's transvestism ultimately created such an obfuscating and uncomfortable figure that, after years of seeking definition and explanation, society ended up righting him off. Reactions in 2006 to an incident when Jackson dressed as an Arab woman in a Bahraini shopping mall so as to hide from photographers (as he had in St Tropez) illustrate this. In response to an article that reported the story in the British newspaper the *Daily Mail*, one male reader felt compelled to post on the newspaper's website: 'The best way to deal with Jackson is to ignore him totally and [to] not give him any recognition.'[88] Another reader meanwhile, also male, responded with the

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[85] BET.com member, quoted in 'America Shocked, But Black America Seething Over a Shackled Jackson', at http://www.bet.com/articles/1,c1gb8048-8894,00.html [accessed 31 January 2004].

[86] Dick Gregory, quoted in Boyd Farrow, 'Jackson Arrest Coverage Shows its True Colours', at http://www.observer.guardian.co.uk/business/story/0,6903,1101375,00.html [accessed 26 January 2004].

[87] Unknown, quoted in Farrow, 'Jackson Arrest Coverage'.

[88] Anon. (Comments), 'Jacko Spotted Disguised as a Woman', at http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/showbiz/showbiznews.html?in_article_id=375114&in_

comment: 'I think he should wear the damned thing all the time!'[89] The once relatively 'cute' public assignment of Jackson as sexually 'irresolute' seemingly resolved, after years of debate and controversy, into 'Jackson so obfuscating he is best off ignored'. The power Garber argues Jackson reclaimed through transvestism was in fact deflected back in the form of condemnation.[90]

In a culture that relentlessly fetishizes sexual difference, the contradictions and complexities Jackson projected represented a source of great anxiety, especially aroused, it would seem, among apparently heterosexual men (as cited in the responses to Jackson's cross-dressing in Bahrain). Some thirty years ago, the preoccupation was whether or not Jackson had had sex with a girl. Over the years, and in fact for the rest of his life, this question was framed and reframed: does Jackson have sex with other men? With his wives? With himself? With his boys? Or not at all? Attempts at deciphering Jackson's sexuality – the climax to which was the child molestation trial of 2005 – has been a cultural obsession of massive proportions but arguably more to do with others' anxieties than his. Whatever Jackson did or did not do with boys, women or himself, it has been the force of society that has built up the mythology, rooted in deep-seated ideas about black masculinity – overpoweringly potent yet feminized, but always dangerous. As Mercer acknowledges, in this regard it seems impossible if not simply beside the point to attempt to distinguish truth from falsehood.[91]

Conclusions

According to Garber, Jackson was a man, and entertainer, who controlled how he was read and seen. Garber is not alone in this reading, nor is it a new one, as TV host Dick Clark recalls of his first meeting with Jackson:

> My first impression of Michael – when he was there on *American Bandstand* with the Jackson Five, way, way back in '69 or '70 – [was when] I went to interview him and he took the microphone from me. This little biddy high, he took the mic from me! I knew this was a man in control.[92]

As illustrated through Jackson's transvestic play, however, it seems rather that he was far from a man in control. This was essentially due to his ambiguity, which transvestism, and especially black male transvestism, flaunts. Allowed by its ambiguity, the transvested male 'wench' was read in variegated ways – from

page_id=1773 [accessed 24 December 2006].

89 Anon. (Comments), 'Jacko Spotted Disguised as a Woman'.

90 See Chapter 6 for how Eminem deflects Jackson's power through derision.

91 Mercer, 'Monster Metaphors', p. 94.

92 Dick Clark, in *Michael Jackson: The One*, directed by Jim Gable, produced by Michael Jackson and Ann Kim (DVD, Epic, 2024199, 2004).

misogyny and racist ridicule to homosexual expression and same-sex identification – and this has been the case with Jackson who was similarly subjected to and burdened by others' desires and coherences.

In her discussion of Jackson and the transvestite 'third' space, Garber draws on a specific image of the singer: a photograph by the *Rolling Stone* portraitist Annie Leibovitz that appeared in *Vanity Fair* in December 1989. The photo was used, and still features, in the inlay to Jackson's 1995 *HIStory* album (which includes the track 'Scream'). The photograph shows Jackson in a military-style uniform of black tailcoat adorned with epaulets, gold braid and red cuffs (an outfit reminiscent of the Zip Coon dandy of the minstrel show with his 'long tail blue'). His shoes – high-heeled – are gleaming gold and black. His face is heavily made up. His hair is soft and curls down the back of his neck and a single lock falls down over his eyes. He stands before a mirror rapt in thought: 'For all his famous friends', wrote *Vanity Fair*, 'the only one who really knows him is the man in the mirror.'[93] But as Garber goes on to ask: *which* man in *which* mirror? For set before a backdrop of mirrors are what appear to be three full-length Jacksons and, as Garber picks out, the fraction of a fourth. For Garber, the photograph is the ultimate illustration of her 'third': '*Three* here marks a space of possibility, clearly indicated as a beginning rather than a limit, because of the teasing presence of the fourth just moving out of the viewer's sight. It is a portrait of a man – and an entertainer – who controls how he is read and seen.'[94] But while Garber sees three full-length Jacksons and a fractional fourth, she misses the bodily segments of two more Jacksons: a fragment that includes the hand behind his back and that skims down the back of a leg to a boot heel, and another that catches the top of a shoulder down to the tip of a coat-tail. In one way, these Jacksons Garber fails to acknowledge confirm her argument, that the portrait represents the beginning of a process of infinite expansion. But in another way, as Garber sees four Jacksons when there are in fact six, the picture captures the most powerful black transvestite minstrel of our day failing to control how he is seen.

The Leibovitz photograph, with its discrepancy, visualizes the problems with which Jackson's transvested body was beset: its contradictory feminization yet glorified male insignia, which offered only uncertainty and, like the traditional minstrel 'wench', allowed infinite possibilities in its interpretation. In relation to post-structuralist literary studies, one might recall here Barthes's 'text', the meanings of which are created not by its author but by its reader to open up an interpretive plurality. This plurality, he argues, is continuously and eternally recreated: 'We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and

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93 Unknown, quoted in Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 296.

94 Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 296.

clash.'[95] In true minstrel style, Jackson as black transvestite threw up meanings and significances that certainly clashed, and his power was only in his ability to do this: to project and mix meaning (explicable only through other people's words) in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Barthes's semantic exteriority undoubtedly had much to do with Jackson's success, his mutable body and voice creating a mutability in meaning to produce the powerful illusion, as Fuchs acknowledges: '"Michael" performs for me personally.'[96] But so, too, was Jackson's multivalency the source of many of his troubles. Jackson's semantic ambiguity, as compacted and entangled as in the traditional minstrel 'wench', diminished his power. Jackson's transvestic body created the perfect 'text' in which his audience could and continues to invest its own interests, produce its own meanings and meet its own needs, at the cost of the author's life.

[95] Roland Barthes, 'Death of the Author', in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (New York: Longman, 1988), pp. 166-72, at p. 170.

[96] Fuchs, 'Michael Jackson's Penis', p. 14.

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Chapter 8
This Is It

Michael Jackson's *This Is It*

In a London press conference in March 2009, before screaming fans and the world's media, Michael Jackson bullishly announced his comeback: a run of ten shows over eight months, starting July, to be held in the capital's 23,000-capacity O2 Arena. After showing up almost an hour late to what was a brief and seemingly drugged-up performance, Jackson declared: 'This is it, the final curtain call.' When tickets were released, sales went through the ceiling for *This Is It*, reportedly selling at their peak at a rate of 16,000 per second. Jackson had not toured since the *HIStory* World Tour in 1996-97 and had not performed live on stage properly for a decade. On seeing the potential for resale and profit, even non-fans scrambled for tickets. Apparently in light of such demand, over night the ten dates became 50, the first leg of a world tour and a three-year binding contract for Jackson with AEG Live, the concert's promoters. But amid the show's final rehearsals in Los Angeles on 25 June, just two weeks before his opening night, Jackson suffered cardiac arrest at his home: the result of an accidental overdose of the powerful hospital anaesthetic Propofol, along with a number of other sedatives. Despite paramedics' attempts at revival, Jackson's death was confirmed shortly after arrival at the UCLA Medical Centre.

The wisdom of AEG Live's decision to finance Jackson's comeback was quickly cross-examined: rumours of Jackson's ill health had not gone away since his 2005 acquittal on child molestation charges and since that time he had led a semi-reclusive life with his three children, for a time in Bahrain and latterly in Holmby Hills, Los Angeles. It soon came to light that the motivation on Jackson's part for *This Is It* had been largely financial, the prospect of bankruptcy, hitherto denied, having finally hit home as he faced the reality of losing his 2,500 acre Neverland Ranch – the emblem of his status, and reign, as the King of Pop (he had not lived there though since the huge police raid following his arrest for child molestation in 2003). His decision to do ten shows, however, had been apparently reluctant – a last resort – and things had quickly run away from him. Not long into the concert's preparations Jackson was reported to have described to one aide how he had 'gone to bed with ten shows and woken up the next day to fifty'.[1] Soon after the announcement of *This Is It*, rumours circulated on the subject of Jackson's health, along with questions over his stamina and whether he would be able to

[1] Quoted in *Michael Jackson's Last Days: What Really Happened*, directed and produced by Annie Kossoff (Mentorn Media, 2009), Channel 4, 12 July 2009.

deal with negative press. Jackson failed to show up to early rehearsals, at one stage reportedly having turned up to just two out of the 45 that had taken place.

In a press conference AEG Live's creative director Kenny Ortega, along with chief executive Randy Phillips, denied such stories, crowing that they were 'having a blast' and 'a great time' and that Jackson was the happiest he had been in a long while. When pushed specifically on the singer's physical health, Ortega responded with a laugh and a grin: 'I would trade my body for his tomorrow! He's in fantastic shape!' Meanwhile, backing singers, dancers and musicians had been silenced by a three-year confidentiality agreement; interestingly enough the same duration as their contracts, suggesting that the initial modest run of ten shows had never been the intention for AEG. In the wake of Jackson's death the company was left facing losses of around $40 million (£24 million) on the concerts, and its shareholders $400 million (£240 million), the sum estimated to have been made from working with Jackson over three years.

The King of Pop is dead

As the news of what was looking like Jackson's death broke (at the hands of the Hollywood-based gossip website TMZ, which released the first report that paramedics had been called to Jackson's Holmby Hills mansion) news websites crashed, including TMZ. CNN saw a massive fivefold rise in the hits on its website, reportedly receiving 20 million page views in the hour the story broke.[2] As word of Jackson's death spread across the globe, internet search engines collapsed under the pressure of 'Michael Jackson' searches. Social network site Twitter and the internet encyclopaedia Wikipedia were also temporarily disabled. Such scrambles for a bit of what was left of Jackson were mirrored in record stores: from the moment Jackson's death was confirmed, the sales of his music went stratospheric. The day following the announcement of his death saw music sales that surpassed those of Presley's the day following his untimely demise and consequently the greatest one-day profit for one artist ever. With sales greater than even those in his heyday, overnight Jackson bestrode the pop charts (later becoming the best-selling artist of 2009). Jackson was bigger and better than ever.

The weeks that followed Jackson's death saw an international outpouring of grief with candle-lit vigils, accompanied by Jackson's music and the mass laying of flowers and other tributes, springing up wherever fans felt fit: at the gates of Neverland, at Jackson's Holmby Hills home, on his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, at the Jackson family home in Gary, Indiana, outside London's O2 Arena and at the Staples Centre, Los Angeles, where the final rehearsals for *This Is It* had been held. Makeshift shrines spontaneously sprang up outside the doors of record

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[2] Nick Hunt and Linnie Rawlinson, 'Jackson Dies, Almost Takes Internet with Him', at http://articles.cnn.com/2009-06-26/tech/michael.jackson.internet_1_google-trends-search-results-michael-jackson?_s=PM:TECH [accessed 11 May 2012].

stores and American embassies the world over. Fans united further when, on the release of the details of Jackson's memorial service (7 July at the Staples Centre), flights to LA and surrounding cities sold out. It was reported that British Airlines had to put on extra flights. Hotels, motels and bed and breakfasts in the area had never known such trade. Televised globally by CNN and broadcast live online, the memorial drew over a billion viewers: it was the biggest live event CNN had ever hoisted up.

The same weeks saw hyperbolic media coverage of relentless conjecture regarding the circumstances surrounding Jackson's death, including the role his personal physician, Dr Conrad Murray, may or may not have played. Commentators and 'insiders' were eager to be heard, while a host of new best friends emerged, eager either to extract their pound of flesh from Jackson's estate or to be remembered as his closest ally. Lawsuits in the multiple millions sprang up (joining the dozens of legal cases already in progress at the time of Jackson's death) along with rumours regarding Jackson's will, custody battles for his three children and the vast amounts of money to be made from a tribute tour (an idea quickly mooted). When arguments broke out among Jackson's family (between brother Jermaine and mother Katherine) over where the singer should be laid to rest, the mayor of Gary, Indiana was quick to the see the economic gains of returning Jackson home. All was up for grabs.

Of media interest and indulgence more than any of this was all that was intensely private. This comprised a rash of detailed accounts documenting Jackson's last few hours (including the circulation of a photograph of Jackson's lifeless body being worked on by paramedics and later an aerial film of it being transported in a body bag) and information leaked from the mortuary, including the gruesome details of autopsy procedures and toxicology testing. Jackson's body became the site of an obsession beyond even the extremes to which it had been subjected in life, his corpse reduced to and dispersed into body parts in daily accounts of its sad condition: while Jackson's nose was said to be missing as he lay under deep freeze, so was his brain, having been removed for toxicology tests. Media outlets were said to be paying thousands of dollars for bogus mortuary reports. Delays induced by both post-mortem protocol and indecision on where to lay Jackson to rest only served to prolong the horror of it all. As Francesca Biller-Safran observed on the internet-based *Huffington Post*: 'Michael [is being] portrayed as an oddity, monster, freak and ghoulish character undeserved of a proper burial. No human being deserves such abuse and torment, before or after death.'[3]

Most media commentators, particularly men, were less sympathetic than Biller-Safran. White American journalist Simon Barrett, after acknowledging that Jackson commanded a large and loyal group of fans, scoffed: 'I guess the fans were

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[3] Francesca Biller-Safran, 'Revolting Revelations: Michael Jackson Still not Allowed Burial', at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/francesca-billersafran/revolting-revelation-mich_b_244943.html?view=screen [accessed 20 August 2009].

relatively safe, as they were mostly female.'[4] Similar comments saturated articles and chat rooms the internet over. The rancorous vitriol was overwhelming, his death reigniting attacks on his gender, sexuality, 'race', plastic surgery, familial and domestic arrangements and acquittal but not vindication on child sex charges. While the singer's grieving fans (many of them women) shared endless heartfelt tributes on blog sites, detractors (many of them young men) devoted just as much time to engaging in derisive debates and voicing their contempt. One blogger posted, 'Another paedophile off the face of the earth'; another, 'Say BYE to America's favourite paedophile'; and another, 'Not another article about this drugged-out freak?' Some half a dozen protesters were so keen to be heard they stood among fans gathered to watch the singer's memorial service wielding placards emblazoned with the words 'Jacko in hell' and 'Mourn for your sins', condemning him over the charges of child molestation. New York congressman Peter King, meanwhile, felt the need to release a YouTube video calling the troubled singer a 'pervert' and 'lowlife'. In death, Jackson polarized public opinion even more than he had in life: the singer was at once an idolized messiah-like figure – literally a god – and a paedophile freak. Both ends of the spectrum were, however, aligned in their rigour.

Among the high-profile loyalists eager to voice their support for the Jackson family in the media-saturated weeks following Michael's death were Civil Rights leaders the Reverends Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. As the Jackson family reeled from Joseph's early disastrous press conference, in which the family patriarch had touted his new record label, both Sharpton and Jesse Jackson served as spokesman. While the impression was that the black community's two most famous figures were rallying round, some looked upon their involvement sceptically: 'Michael Jackson left Al Sharpton the greatest gift of all: the world's media.'[5] Indeed, Sharpton had not always been such a keen supporter of the pop star: in 2002, amid Jackson's charges of racism against Sony executives (which had included high-profiled protests outside the record label's headquarters in London and Manhattan), Sharpton had initially backed Jackson only to switch his support to Sony CEO Tommy Mottola when the publicity died down.

Black America, meanwhile, united in its grief: indeed, it was not the White House but the Congressional black caucus that first spoke in American politics of Jackson's death. On 26 June the House of Representatives observed a moment's silence in Jackson's honour, led by Jesse Jackson Jr who eulogized:

> Madam Speaker, if there is a God, and I believe there is, and that god distributes grace and mercy and talent to all his children, on Aug. 28, 1958, he visited Gary, Ind., and touched a young man with an abundance of his blessings … With that

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[4] Simon Barrett, 'Michael Jackson – Uri Geller (Spoon Bender) Speaks Out', at http://www.bloggernews.net/121467 [accessed 18 August 2009].

[5] Simon Scowl, 'Al Sharpton Defends Michael Jackson Sometimes', at http://www.deceiver.com/2009/07/10/al-sharpton-defends-michael-jackson-sometimes/ [accessed 23 September 2009].

> gift, that young man, Michael Joe Jackson, would touch and change the world. His heart couldn't get any bigger, and yesterday it arrested.[6]

Presided over by Sharpton, Jackson's memorial service became a global stage for the voice of Black America. Although a man known for his incendiary rhetoric, Sharpton nonetheless voiced sentiments endorsed by a clutch of high-end black Americans: Stevie Wonder, Usher, Lionel Richie, Berry Gordy and Smokey Robinson among those from the pop world, and Kobe Bryant and Magic Johnson from that of sport. Their tributes took the form of musical numbers from the gospel and soul traditions and sombre 'message' speeches. The Staples Centre, home to the LA Lakers basketball team, was transformed into less a musical arena than a church: the traditional place of refuge for Black America since slavery.

T.D. Rice on the Bowery stage

The widespread commotion Jackson's sudden death brought is visualized by one of the earliest pictorial appraisals of blackface minstrelsy: a lithograph of T.D. Rice 'jumping Jim Crow' at 'the people's' Bowery Theatre, New York in 1833 (recall Figure 1.1). The engraving depicts Rice in his 'original and celebrated extravaganza of Jim Crow' on its *57th* night, for the show was unprecedented in its audience attraction. This attraction is captured in the picture: while Rice performs centre stage with a fiddler by his side, the crowd, in its excitement, has thronged to the foot of the stage and overflowed onto it. Rice is entirely penned in.

In the picture Rice is proportionally larger than the men around him as well as a little darker in shade. The fiddle player, however, is less distinct and merges into the crowd. The crowd itself, which surrounds Rice, is made up of a variety of white men, from workers in smocks and straw hats to militiamen and 'respectable' gentlemen in top hats. Some of the men are fighting: to the right of Rice, two scuffles have broken out (one man has been knocked to the ground); while the men to the left of Rice appear to be squabbling and pushing each other too. Others, further back, wave bottles or batons and someone wields a cello or violin overhead. Apparently all in fights or conversations with one another, the men of the audience look every which way but directly at Rice, the star of the show, who bows with one knee bent and arms outstretched to the auditorium in typical minstrel pose. While the stage is packed, the auditorium is too; so are the boxes and tiers, visible just inside the frame. It is from here, seated and set back from the spectacle, that the women of the audience look on.

The most compelling aspect of this appraisal of blackface minstrelsy is that the majority of the audience seems wholly uninterested in the performance to which

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[6] Jesse Jackson Jr, quoted in Alex Koppelman, 'On House Floor, a Moment of Silence for Michael Jackson', at http://www.salon.com/2009/06/26/cbc_mj/ [accessed 19 June 2012].

it has swarmed and which it has paid to see so that the act ironically overlooks itself. As Eric Lott describes: 'The crowd has become both background and foreground – it is not too much to say that it has become the spectacle itself, so much is Rice dwarfed by the crowd's interest in its own activities.'[7] Lott uses the picture, and its centrality of audience response, to illustrate the level of investiture in such performances and in Jim Crow and blackface minstrelsy more broadly. For Lott, the investiture in this performance of Rice as Jim Crow on his 57th night is about class values and differentiation, and those of white working-class men in particular, negotiated and worked out over and around the 'inferiority' of the black male body. But as Lott goes on, however, this investiture was not uniform but variable because as well as racial derision and white working-class self-aggrandizement, black desire and identification were also in the mix. 'Most striking is the illustration's assertion …', Lott writes, 'that this audience is seeing the performance and performing onstage at the same time, indulging both in "blackness" and in a kind of ironic self-presentation or self-promotion.'[8]

In a way perhaps impossible to capture visually any more precisely than in this picture, Lott insists audience interest varied, not only within a single auditorium but also within the minds of individual audience members.[9] W.T. Lhamon similarly foregrounds this complexity when he writes: 'the publics in the popular theatres were not a stable audience but a mixed lot. Some theatregoers surely inclined toward … aggression … Others, however, sought in blackface … confirmation for their sense of black allure. Others, perhaps most, divided along these lines within themselves.'[10] This mixed investiture within even a single spectator's mind and the interest yet lack of interest in the performance that resulted is specifically visualized for Lott in the Rice picture by the white worker who is being held back from the fight just to the right of Rice: while the man's legs point straight towards Rice and centre stage his torso is turned a full 180° so that he is watching the fight behind him. With its impossible contortion, the figure for Lott 'suggests either an artistic confusion about the real matter of interest or a trick of the pen meant to unsettle us about it'.[11]

Despite its preoccupations, Rice's audience, such as that in this lithograph, was nevertheless demanding in what it wanted, its rowdier members typically calling out performance requests amid the mayhem. As one journalist of the *New York Mirror* reported of one such audience as that depicted in the Bowery scene: 'When Mr. Rice came on stage to sing his celebrated song of Jim Crow, they not only made him repeat it some twenty times, but hemmed him in so that he actually had no room to perform the little dancing or turning about appertaining to the song.'[12] While the real interests of minstrelsy were the audiences' own, these were only allowed and mediated by the

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7 Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 124.

8 Ibid., p. 126.

9 Ibid., p. 124.

10 Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 163.

11 Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 126.

12 Unknown, quoted in Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 80.

black male body. Itself obsessed over, the black male body in blackface minstrelsy was always at stake even when the audience appeared to disengage and turn away.

The blackface minstrel of our time

This portrayal of Rice at the Bowery could be one of Michael Jackson for to call Jackson's 'performance' – his music and his life – his own, as Lott writes of Rice's, 'already understates the case'.[13] In Jackson there was apparently much at stake for others, from his fans to his detractors and evident from Westlife to Eminem, who together fought long and hard over and around him claiming his as theirs or not theirs and meeting their own ends. This process was nowhere more apparent than in the weeks that followed Jackson's death: in his 'performance' (for death is a wonderful career move) and others' reactions, which revealed themselves to be a crude, hyperbolic microcosm of his life. In a way that deeply resonates with the Jackson case, Lott writes of Rice and his own performance almost two centuries ago: '"Black" figures were … shaped to the demands of desire; they were screens on which audience fantasy could rest … [a process that] had a host of different effects.'[14] The excessive involvement of Rice's crowd indicates how it used him and his 'black' body to its own ends. While this is why the historiography of blackface minstrelsy should now turn to its audience, as suggested from the outset of this book, it also explains why others have had such excessive involvement in Jackson.

As with Rice and his racial 'two-facedness', this excessive involvement was allowed by Jackson by his racial and sexual ambiguities, perfect for an interpretive plurality and the subjectivity of others. While Jackson continually played into, and lived up to, the multivalency characteristic of his performative tradition, he perfected the form, his body defying determinacy in a fashion hitherto unknown to minstrelsy in a culture that still demands racial and sexual understanding through binarism and representability. Dividing public opinion, Jackson was our own Jim Crow, a mutable figure and a pawn for racial and sexual containment and liberation, fear and disdain, desire and love; lots of things and none of them necessarily excluding the other. As Julian Vigo asks, rhetorically: 'Certainly, to some, Jackson is a freak. To others he is a hero, an artist, an innovator, a peacemaker, a philanthropist. But what if he is all of the above?'[15] Through life and death, in this ambiguity, Jackson was a cultural plaything for others' self-serving needs. And so deep-seated is this process that it continues: *The Guardian* wrote of David Gest's 2011 biopic of Jackson, *The Life of an Icon*, 'it is the attorneys (and Gest) who end up taking centre stage'.[16] The minstrel's role in serving others is a

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[13] Lott, *Love and Theft*, p. 124.

[14] Ibid., p. 140.

[15] Vigo, 'Metaphor of Hybridity', p. 41.

[16] Simon Hattenstone, 'Michael Jackson's Iconic Life, Starring David Gest', at http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2011/nov/02/michael-jackson-life-of-an-icon [accessed

process that runs so long and deep through the history of blackface performance that the tradition has been haunted by an image of involuntary black servitude, from its first pictorial assessment – Rice bowing low, arms outstretched – to the gesture Al Jolson made famous – down on one knee – to Jackson offering himself up in his 'crucifix' pose.

Like the earliest black minstrels robbed of their own sense of Self and enslaved instead to the imaginations of all but their own, Jackson has been little more than the slave to others. His robotic moves aestheticize this, mechanical, jerky and repetitive, yet between their executions he glides across the stage. His limbs move seemingly on their own, controlled by a force outside themselves, and they continue to move even in death in the vast collection of images and films he has left behind. Jackson was robotic in his magnificent production: the sheer scale of his musical output, which rose out of the musical slavery and exacting standards first of his father and then of the hit factory that was Motown. His output and professionalism are rivalled by no other.

Jackson served all points of the compass until he could serve no more. He served revolution and hope, breaking down barriers of race, gender and sex, yet in being the victim of the same, he served containment and defeat. Revolution and control were the two pumping chambers at the heart of traditional blackface minstrelsy and at the heart of Jim Crow. 'Not everyone lives long enough to turn things round … they die trying', wrote gay TV host and *Huffington Post* reporter Charles Bouley following Jackson's death. 'He died trying. He kept going. He gathered up his "mess" and always kept it moving.'[17] But as Lhamon writes of the traditional minstrel, however, Jackson neither solved nor resolved the problems he made us address.[18] His dirt is our souvenir.[19]

In the global hoopla that followed Michael's sudden death, AEG Live released a video clip of *This Is It* rehearsal footage that had been filmed two days before he died. The clip, which was used in all subsequent TV news bulletins covering Michael's death, is of the singer on stage with a posse of muscle-clad male dancers. He performs 'They Don't Care About Us', his strongest 'message' song in its angry attack at prejudice and oppression, its title a bit of black American wisdom about white folks.[20] Michael sputters the words he has sung a million times that dare his audience to 'Jew' him, 'sue' him, 'kick' and 'kike' him. Mistaken as racial slurs, these were the lyrics Michael had had to defend on the song's original

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17 Charles Karel Bouley, 'The Man Goes Through the Mirror', at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/charles-karel-bouley/the-man-goes-through-the_b_221456.html [accessed 28 August 2009].

18 Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, p. 78.

19 'Moonwalking', *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 23/1 (2011): 94-5, at p. 94.

20 Armond White, 'Screaming to be Heard, Book II', in Armond White, *Keep Moving: The Michael Jackson Chronicles* (Washington DC: Resistance Works, 2009), pp. 63-71, at p. 67.

release, when he had explained: 'I am the voice of the accused and the attacked. I am the voice of *everyone*.'[21] Michael's dance style is stiff, particularly robotic in his 'marking out'. His face is pale and gaunt; his body skeletal. The song draws to its climax with a short breakdown then closes to the screech of a car horn. Michael's final move is a militant right arm, hand palm-side up to the camera. As if he knew the eyes of history were watching, perhaps it was his plea for the demands of others to stop. Mirrored by his posse, Michael freezes. His arm drops to his side. His eyes close. His chest pounds. He looks tortured. Then smiles, as if remembering (see Figure 8.1): 'Dance as no one can; sing with the humor or pathos no one else has; make jokes about oneself (make oneself into a joke), anything, everything but with style; turn to the audience and bow deeply and smile broadly.'[22] Two days later Michael's heart bowed out. He had been put on the stone and pulverized, and there was nothing left to give.

Figure 8.1 Michael's closing smile from *This Is It*

[21] Michael Jackson, quoted in Bernard Weinraub, 'In New Lyrics, Jackson Uses Slurs', at http://www.nytimes.com/1995/06/15/arts/in-new-lyrics-jackson-uses-slurs.html [accessed 21 June 2012]; my emphasis.

[22] Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, p. 245. Written by Charlie Chaplin in 1954, 'Smile' was Michael's favourite song and it was sung by his older brother, Jermaine, at his public memorial service. The sentiment of the song resonates with the role played by black minstrels, who grinned on stage while off it they showed grace, however hard life became.

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